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Brian Stableford C. S. Lewis and the Decline of Scientific Romance

This is the text of a talk delivered to the C. S. Lewis Society at Oxford University on 26 January 1992. The Society is devoted to the study and celebration of the works of a group of Christian fantasists, including George MacDonald, G. K. Chesterton, J. R. R. Tolkien and Charles Williams as well as Lewis himself.

My book on *Scientific Romance in Britain, 1890-1950*, published by Fourth Estate in 1985 and since consigned to that eternal darkness to which all out of print books are damned, attempts to present the entire history of the genre of British fiction which employed the speculative methods of what is nowadays called "science fiction" in the years before that label was imported from America. One of the book's central theses is that before 1950, when our post-war neo-colonialization led to a fusion of British and American popular culture, British scientific romance and American science fiction evolved in distinctively different ways, in terms of their chief concerns, their attitudes, and their situation in the literary marketplace. The book devotes separate chapters to twelve major writers, and a further twenty or so are dealt with in portmanteau chapters. C. S. Lewis is one of two major writers—the other being Gerald Heard—considered in the final section of the book, a section entitled "The Twilight of Scientific Romance." What I want to do in this paper is to show how Lewis's relevant works of fiction relate to the tradition of British scientific romance, and how they reflect the eventual tragic senility which overcame that tradition.

Scientific romance first became established as an identifiable popular genre during a boom in periodical publishing at the beginning of the 1890s. It had numerous historical connections with previously-existing genres, including Utopian fantasies and imaginary voyages, but popular scientific romance really grew out of the genre of future war stories which had been established in Britain in the wake of George Chesney's classic exercise in propaganda, *The Battle of Dorking* (1871). This story, intended dramatically to illustrate Britain's unpreparedness for war and incapacity to resist an invasion of its soil, sparked off dozens of replies in kind, laying down important precedents for the new periodicals of the 1890s, some of whose proprietors tried to cash in on similar anxiety by presenting more detailed and more melodramatic accounts of German invasions of Britain. These, in their turn, inspired more extravagant tales of world war.

The future war stories of the 1890s achieved their melodramatic extravagance by means of the realization that new technologies might make very dramatic differences to the way that future wars would be fought. In particular, they focused on the likely uses in war of aeroplanes and submarines, but more ambitious writers also began to consider such possibilities as atomic weapons, chemical and biological warfare, and various quasi-magical rays. Two of the most important early writers of scientific romance, George Griffith and M. P. Shiel, achieved their first significant literary successes with extravagant future war stories. Griffith with *The Angel of the Revolution* and Shiel with *The Yellow Danger*. Many of the minor contributors to the genre came into it by this route. H. G. Wells, who became the central figure of the

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Kathryn Cramer gives 1990
a thick description
*Plus entisies, memexes, creeps, fallen angels,
and Nebulas now and then*

Barry N. Malzberg Some Reflections on Freud, Fantasy & the Jewish Condition

1. Freud had ideas, he was ceaselessly in pursuit of himself. Up and down the corridors of retrospection and memory did Freud stomp, beard flying to and fro, cigar ("sometimes it is merely a cigar") poised at the ready, a detective of motive, seeking the endless, unrelenting self concealed behind this will and that to think of him, even at this great remove of time (he has been dead as long as I have been alive) is to be seized by respect for the man, to consider with awe yet again what he was able to do. Saddled with the arc of the century, given unhappy, grumbling, overcast Viennese with whom to deal, granted his own philology and constraint, Freud had to generalize from the most unpromising material yet there he is, towering over our century just yet and dead for a considerable part of it. How winning his smile, how dashing his tact, how moving his tears! His grief is our grief and abandoned by him, we must forage—as did Freud himself—for little nuggets of insights hidden behind the arras of identity. Oh, why did thou ask such questions, Freud, only to deny us and depart? These are the fundamental questions, our ontology recapitulates your philology, we are not to be put off by easy or even intricate excuses.

2. Chagall's flying cows, flying rabbis, arched and floating houses, scheming Jews, wounded cattle reminds us of the open and wounded places of ourselves, those places toward which Freud, Sherlock Holmes of the underground has stalked. Chagall's visions are mild, Freud's are pointed. Freud makes us assassins whereas Chagall knows that we merely want a meal, a minyan, a place to put our shoes, but they emerge from the same secret places where our desires and our dreams can be said to mingle. Like Dali, like Picasso, Chagall became very old and sinister in his age, in the possession of those cells which made him an icon but he never lurched into self-parody or repetition; Chagall was parody from the outset . . . representational of that which could barely be defined and a huge laugh for anyone in the street who thought that God was watching or thought that God was not watching or took God as a wounded cow. Together and at rest now, Freud and Chagall

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conspire against us, the one with bleak and shrouded visions, the other with a merciless abstruseness that always, always fold back but in the morning it is Chagall's village, not Freud's caverns which claims us as we go off into the mid light, seeking a gentle and perceptive cow who will fill out the minyan of our desire.

3. Chagall's murals dominate the Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center; when the house opened in 1965 they were controversial, a scandal to some, large, slashed with color, naive, somehow reductive the analysts said, of the really intricate and always secular phenomena which were taking place in the house. But Chagall knew better: Berg's *Lulu* was on that stage and indeed it was Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra* which opened the Metropolitan: what matter if the Barber failed and *Lulu*, in its truncated state, needed the composer's widow to die so that the bitter, adulterous yearnings of its unknown third act could be revealed? Chagall's concern was never with repertoire, his grieving or elated peasants, his Cossacks twirling on the red points of silky shoes, his commissars and duchesses rushing into the central hall knew better than any of their witnesses how deeply symptomatic they were, not cause but outcome, not representation but at the center.

4. Freud and Chagall charting about the role of fantasy in the Jewish psyche and literature, two old Jews walking together around a pond, enjoying the sunset in these last, smudged vestiges of their life before they move into their separate and ever so perfectly fitting purgatoria. "Time is a river without banks," Chagall points out, "it overflows, it catches us by surprise, it catches us with our pants down to the ankles doing unspeakable or merely embarrassing things in the chamber and it says, 'caught you out, boy, ho there!' Time is that medium in which, all fish, we swim; the aquaria itself is the universe, or don't you think that this is the case Sigmund?" Freud shrugs, he is not elfin or fiv in the way that he takes Chagall to be but he is not devoid of humor himself. Largely he is confused, the century has gotten away from him, his disciples have gotten away from him, here he gave all these principles and devotions and what have they done with it? the rubble of the century is evidence of their misdirection, he thinks. "I don't really know, Marc," he says, "it's hard to understand; guilt, guilt is the

medium in which we swim, though, this is what we think. And then fantasy is the means by which we try to extract ourselves from our guilt, even if we are *not* Jews which as a matter of fact most of us are. Jews are the paradigm of the century." Freud is an earnest man, in his school days he was the kind who always answered the questions first, reflected later if at all, tried to keep up with his studies, tried to present a solemn and devoted mask to his instructors. Asked to devolve upon fantasy and the Jewish psyche he means to stick to the subject, even if Chagall cannot. "It wasn't easy," Freud says. He points up at the sky which looks remarkably like a Chagall landscape, smokestacks in the high distance. "Do you see what I mean?"

Chagall looks up with him, looks away, skips along in a rapid hobble which meets but does not mesh with Freud's pace. "You take all of this too seriously," he says. "Think of it as a joke, as a burlesque, a giant hand reaching within and tearing things away, leaving us with the necessities which are the quotient of our existence. *Quotidia*? Either way, that is the only fashion to consider this; we make pictures and dance." Chagall gives Freud an idle kick in the calf, not enough to hurt him, azic resolve, really, but it is enough to infuriate Freud who has always felt that dignity was at the center of his persona and that without that dignity he would be what he most feared as a quotidian result: a defenseless Jew in an overcoat, a bearded Jew with a cigar, a clown in a shiny suit constructing parables to explain away his useless and towering pain. Freud, thus enraged, turns on Chagall to swat him, to beat him, to show this gumboling artist that his persona cannot be dealt with so cheaply, so egregiously but as he reaches toward Chagall it is as if he sees him for the first time, sees the features unfold to grant him the quivering, open heart of Marc Chagall, an artist so close to the spiritual needs of the average Jew that he can only mock them and Freud backs away then, quite flabbergasted, his hand trembling. "Jewish fantasy and psychoanalysis and tradition and the Judaic promise, they are all the same, he says. "There are no differences, no barriers. The only barriers are those we erect." So saying, Freud begins to giggle, it is a relieved giggle yet one with tones of hysteria within and around it and as, with some detachment the head of the Freudian school considers himself, he

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Read This

Recently read and recommended by Steve Rasmie Tom:

Neons, Denis Belloc, tr. by William Rodarmor, Godine, 1991. Belloc's brief tale of the violent homosexual underworld in 1960s Paris is arranged as a series of fragments done in a sharp, almost brutal prose which still manages to achieve a tense, unnerving sort of poetry.

A Dictionary of Angels (including the fallen angels), Gustav Davidson, The Free Press, 1967. For anyone interested in the names and activities of angels (and who wouldn't be?), this is a good reference to start with.

The Sandman: The Doll's House, graphic novel by Neil Gaiman, Mike Dringenberg, Malcom Jones III and Robbie Busch, DC Comics, 1990. Simply shows what comics can become in the hands of a literate storyteller. Imaginative, unpredictable, an impressive blending of modes and genres.

The Holy Terror, Wayne Allen Sallee, Mark V. Ziesing, 1992. Unapologetically not to everyone's taste, here Sallee risks a pain-ridden cast of characters the like of which horror has never seen before. Sallee's slice of Chicago life maintains a

strange eloquence in its obscenities. Original, refreshingly authentic, disquieting stuff.

And a smattering of "New Gothics":

Whores for Gloria, William T. Vollmann, Pantheon, 1991. A literary nightmare of the inner city, told in exquisite prose.

The Almanac Branch, Bradford Morrow, Simon & Schuster, 1991. Beautifully written novel demonstrating that what we imagine can be as important to our lives as what happens to us in the "real" world.

Physical Culture, Hillary Johnson, Poseidon, 1989. This fictional study of masochism evokes the pains of concealment, both physical and psychological.

Blood, Janice Galloway, Random House, 1991. Galloway plays with form with remarkable sureness throughout these dark, surrealist stories.

begins to realize the truly ominous indications of his condition. Chagall fans himself, waves to something in the sky, beams upon Freud. They seem to have reached some kind of impasse. Or perhaps it is a breakthrough.

5. We think of Freud—"we" not being Chagall now, Chagall has gone home, he has gone away, he has gone to that place where Braque and Picasso and lecherous little Modigliani play at *innocence* and consider their prospects in the eternal, never-ending high stakes posterity game—at an earlier stage, Freud in the throes of his practice at the turn of the century, exposed to the hysterical anguish of superheated and lonely females. This one says she has been F. by her father, another claims to have suffered an uncle's hand upon her genitals when she was eight, a third, a fourth, a fifth report half-remembered tangled memories of illicit connections of all sorts. Thinking of Freud, considering his agony and his angst as he hears these confessions, we must feel some sympathy for him; it is not easy to face the fact that so many of these women have been misused, misused in childhood by trusted male relatives, have had their genitals and their most private thoughts violated. If this is true, and Freud's initial impulse is to accept the revelations, then humanity is unspokeable; if his mild, troubled Viennese are capable of such horrid indecency and calumny, then what will be said of the masses when, some three or four decades in the future, they really become inflamed?

Concerned with this, concerned with his own fantasies which for all we know might be composed of lecherous desire for these women (one thing that Freud has come to admit of his own school of therapy is that it is an interesting way to meet otherwise inaccessible women on the most riotous and glaring of terms), concerned with the proprieties of this situation and the century, Freud comes to a decision. This cannot be. The women cannot be telling the truth; their hysteria and superheated mode is indeed the product of agitation but the agitation comes not from sexual misuse or violation but from the *desire* for it. They must, his new patients, have invented this pattern of behavior to define impulses which otherwise would have been unacceptable. Accordingly, Freud recounts. He recounts upon his earlier testimony, his earlier apprehensions, writes his friend Fleiss a letter, several letters, pointing out the revisions in his thinking. "It is fantasy," Freud writes, "it is an aspect of their neurosis, it is a disease, a sickness." He feels great security in saying this. After all, it is a neurotic century, a century of fantasy. In the years to come, the most unspeakable desires and inner needs will be played out with smokestacks upon the canvas of the century. Like Chagall, the technicians will make the cows fly, the


ivers overflow, but they will do it with machinery, with the gleaming arc of technology, not with the gentler works of panels or oils against wood.

"It is a century of fantasy," Freud says quietly, turning to look for our assent in the small room devoted to his ponderings and writing. He has come in these recent years to imagine the presence of auditors in the room who bear witness and will comment to those outside about his condition and he considers this a dream so benign, so devoid of actual menace or dysfunctional aspect that he permits himself this dialogue without embarrassment. How pleased he would be to know that what he imagines is actually true and that we have come, decades and decades later, toward the end of the century, to consider him in exactly this way! "To understand is to forgive," Freud murmurs, "this is the core of my philosophy," and who is to say that he is wrong? Understanding nothing, knowing nothing, we have been poised for disaster for years and years, the rubble of our potential is all around us: surely we can find it within ourselves to pity Freud. Surely it was not his fault that he determined the women were engaged in fantasy; he had the advantage of firsthand interviews, contact, affect, in a way which we never will. Considering him in this way, permitting ourselves for the first time to unstop the gush of affection from our Jewish souls for our Jewish forebear, which of us is so stiff-necked as not to relent, as not to say, "You were innocent; you confronted the darkness with the innocence you had and then sprung it upon the world?" Which of us cannot say this? Not that there are as very many of us in the room, of course, there are only a very few permitted such perilous connection.

6. "I would like to add a few words about fantasy, Judaism, Freud and the human condition," Alban Berg says. He is the small man, the adulterous (in mind if not deed) composer who set the Wedekind plays to music, then died in 1935 at the age of 50, just in time to bring the Second Viennese school to a definitive, premature end. "In my opinion, my humble opinion," Berg says, making a point (as do all arrogant men) of his humility, "the three of them must be regarded as the same, as a synchronicity. It is a Jewish century, a Freudian century, a fantasy century. Consider *Lulu*, all of these factors take part in her single-minded arc toward the sewer and at the end she is done in by Jack the Ripper. I don't even want to talk about *Wozzeck* but any soldier who can drown in a pool with a foot of water is an unhappy, a disconcerting symbol, wouldn't you think?" The final act of *Lulu*, supposedly, contains musical anagrams and duodecaphonic statements of Berg's lust for a younger woman; the widow Berg, no musician but possibly with a keener eye than ear, suppressed the last act throughout her lifetime. None of this, however, seems to have much bearing upon Berg's demeanor which is

grim. "I will tell you about fantasy," he says, "fantasy is as terrible if it is explored as if unexplored; once it exists in sufficient color to be apprehended, it will change everything *whether you acknowledge it or not*." Thinking of Freud's hysterical women as we must, struck by the force of Berg's argument, we can only nod. "I tell you, in the 20th century, just as in the historical Jewish condition, if something can happen, then it has already happened, will happen, over and over again, consider the third act of that wretched opera," Berg says and laughs and begins to dissolve in front of us. Curiously insubstantial, unlike the earthy and corporeal Freud, unlike the elfin and jolly Chagall, the sullen and distracted Berg begins to disassemble before our eyes leaving us soon enough, perhaps even sooner than that, with nothing to look upon but the manuscript score of *Lulu* and somewhere beyond that in the smoky, lowering haze, an image of Chagall's cows, now dancing with one another above orange rooftops which leak softer steam into the grey and desperate smoke which seems to leak in upon us, if only momentarily.

7. So, standing outside the Metropolitan Opera House, using the central fountain as backdrop while tourists industriously take our picture (they attended to the rumors that all of us, Berg, Freud, Chagall, and the committee to honor them would be at the performance of *Lulu* tonight and would assemble at the plaza for a quick photo opportunity before

dispersing to our separate parts of the opera house), we feel for the first time in this long and difficult odyssey through all the 48 agonizing years since Freud left us that we may have attained a little perspective. "Replacement, it is always a matter of replacement, that is right, isn't it?" we say. Freud lifts his cigar in a pleasant wave. "We can hope to replace the sinister with the less sinister, the benign with the cheerful, that is all, right?" "Exactly," Chagall says, leaping to a perch beside the fountain, putting his hand on his heart. "Exactly, precisely that is right." Berg shrugs; he was always a moody sort and the true sense of the assemblage has, once again, left him. Nonetheless he does not protest. "Time, time, a river without banks," Chagall says merrily and flutters into the fountain, a porpoise he emerges from the fountain whiskers afloat, flippers poised at great flight and departs from us, moving at great height, increasing velocity toward the top of the Metropolitan Opera. Freud extends a hand; we reach forward to grasp it. Some kind of accommodation seems at the offing. Freud points to Chagall, twinkling above us in the sky. "We have converted human misery into ordinary unhappiness," he says. And so, in this millennial century, will all of you. 

Barry N. Malberg is the author of *The Remaking of Sigmund Freud*. This piece first appeared in the Baltimore Jewish Times.

Nebula Awards 25 edited by Michael Bishop

San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991; \$24.95 hc; 346 pages

reviewed by Charles E. Gannon

Art or commerce? Entertainment or enlightenment? Move over, Aristotle and Bertrand Russell; these aesthetic issues now also enliven the pages of *Nebula Awards 25*.

Discussing matters of truth and beauty is not the central concern of this collection of 1989 fiction, poems, and essays. But, studied as a whole, editor Michael Bishop's montage of sf-related writing is a microcosmic mosaic of the diversity and struggle for self-identity that characterizes the genre. Some readers may feel that the critical essays and reviews are taking up space that ought to be devoted to stories; after all, this is a book about science fiction, isn't it? However, anyone whose love of the genre runs deeper than a passing infatuation with rocket ships and blaster pistols will find *Nebula Awards 25* a thought-provoking, multifaceted gem of sf insight.

To some degree, Bishop's strong emphasis on critical contemplation reflects an editorial strategy that turns necessity into a virtue. Gardner Dozois' *Year's Best SF* is usually on the bookshelves not long after the Nebulas are announced and usually includes at least two-thirds of all the finalist pieces. By way of contrast, the release of Bishop's "official" collection trails its competitor volume by a year or more. Consequently, if the Nebula Awards collection is to be other than an exercise in repetition, Bishop must find a way to give his anthology an identity and pertinence of its own. He has achieved this admirably by casting a wide net across the genre, gathering in not just distinguished fiction, but significant essays and critical summaries.

The Nebula Award anthologies reflect the opinions of sf's authors, rather than its fans and publishers. Since the Nebulas are given by the Science Fiction Writers of America, it is important to bear in mind that the selection process represents more than just a popular response; it is a barometer of the sf community's political and aesthetic attitudes.

Bishop has made this self-reflective aspect of the Nebula Award the unspoken hub of the anthology: a hub that produces a unique, high-torque spin on the critical questions of contemporary sf. Rather than bluntly asking sf's "big" questions (such as: what is sf? Where is it going commercially? Aesthetically?), Bishop lets the selections do the work for him, silently illustrating the issues by the example they themselves provide. Consequently, although *Nebula Awards 25* can certainly be assessed by approaching each story as an individual unit, the true value of the anthology is best appreciated by considering how each piece fits into the dynamic whole of the collection.

To start us off on the correct conceptual foot, Bishop opens with

Damon Knight's slightly updated 1977 offering, "What is SF?" In addition to introducing his now-axiomatic distinction between sf and sci-fi (or "kuffly"), Knight discusses attempts to define the genre. Knight does not address what is "ought" to be, but what it has been, based on historical analysis. However, as he observes in his updated closing, more and more sf stories seem to be less and less focused on the "traditional" sf concerns. Knight leaves the question of definition open-ended—which Bishop cleverly uses as the conceptual foreshadowing for the rest of the book.

Ian Watson's "The Avalanche: A View on the SF and Fantasy Novels of 1989" does indeed overwhelm the reader with its blizzard of synopsized plots and insights. Its focus on sf suffocation via overkill is in fact illustrative of Watson's central point: the economics of quantity may undercut endeavors for quality. In assessing the perils of contemporary publishing, Watson points to the industry's tendency to bury good books when they are not fast-selling, easily-pigeonholed glitz. In restating Greg Bear's comment that "sf eats its authors," one gets the feeling that the genre is fast becoming another arena for treadwar, an arena where there are only two types of contestants: the quick and the dead. Unfortunately, the best, most original books tend not to announce themselves with landslide sales, but with a slower groundswell of interest and support. Watson's essay is a sad reminder that this is the age of the sales tsunami, and if publishing marketers can't hang ten on a book's tidal wave of popularity, then they won't even bother to try surfing on it.

Watson's review of the important novels of 1989 is both exhaustive and exhausting. Among the many works which flit briefly across his lens of abbreviated critical assessment are Dan Simmons' *Hyperion*, Poul Anderson's *The Boat of a Million Years*, Judith Tarr's *A Wind in Cairo*, and Joe Haldeman's *Buying Time*. What do these works have in common? Nothing, except the absolute diversity of style, content, and intent that increasingly characterizes the whole of the fantasy and science fiction field.

Bill Warren's "Year of the Bst. Science Fiction Movies of 1989" (which ultimately expands to take in a view of the cinematic sf trends of the Eighties) is another general review piece. Warren wastes no time in locating the dominant undercurrent that has dragged down most sf film making efforts: conceptual confusion and marketing mismanagement. In his own plain-talk prose, "Science fiction drives the money guys in Hollywood bananas. They know it has its audience, but they are going crazy trying to find it." Unfortunately for sf moviegoers everywhere,

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those money guys spent 1989 (indeed, the entire 1980s) misunderstanding what it is that makes sf great, proving once again that, even in the age of REAL Star Wars, good sf and fine cinema seem to be unable to meet.

Orson Scott Card's "Vulgar Art" offers up ruminations about sf's dualistic identity as both literature and entertainment. Presented in prose devoid of hyperbole, this essay is a small masterpiece of utterly clear writing and straightforward ideas. Card does not attempt to defend the literary merits of sf. Instead, he stakes the biggest game afoot in the literary jungle: the unspoken assumption that if a book is either entertaining or fun, then it cannot be of superior literary merit. Card attacks this aesthetic pretense in a rhythmic fashion, ebbs of understatement alternating with floss of forceful assertions that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with art doubling as entertainment.

Not all readers will find themselves agreeing with Card; his argument that the objectification of art is a good idea which has been taken way too far may, for some, have a decidedly libertarian ring. However, his common sense assertion that the masses inevitably vote with their feet (and purses) serves to underscore the undeniable truth at the core of his essay: though "serious art" is plentiful in the marketplace, is incessantly reviewed in *The New York Times*, and is pushed by most college literature professors, it still hasn't converted the masses to its austere and often obscure aesthetics. In effect, Card is suggesting that the autocratic hierarchy of "serious" art learn from the recent experience of their Communist analogs; dedicated connoisseurs can compel people to profess allegiance to an aesthetic doctrine, but you can't make those people real believers unless that's really what they want to be.

If Card's essay on sf literature is a libertarian's approach to the genre, Richard Grant's "The Exile's Paradigm" might be called the zen-sensuality rejoinder. While many readers might see Grant's essay as a counter to Card's assertions, I prefer to see it as a complement.

Grant's central message—that one should experience each book deeply and on many levels—is an important, refreshing reminder for genre-purveyors who have become accustomed to thinking in their own particular argot. Grant reminds us that all good literature shares certain aspects in common and that every book, every short story, every essay should be approached on its own terms and judged on its own merits. Worry about genre or trends afterwards. Erudite and easy, Grant's warm prose blends dry wit with fluid, familiar imagery that reinforces his assertion that clever plot devices and scientific extrapolations alone cannot breathe life into a book; that miraculous gift comes from the feelings and sensations that we experience as we swim through the prose and share in the lives—and world—of the characters.

Paul Di Filippo's contribution is a satiric pseudo-report entitled "The Great Nebula Sweep." This essay-as-story is a first-published Swiftian blast at Nebula-mania, a brand of reputed madness which Bishop diagnoses as "a malady that afflicts a good portion of the membership of SFWA every spring."

With tongue firmly in cheek, Di Filippo cheerfully herds science fiction's sacred cows into his sardonic slaughterhouse. The basic premise is a high-tech revision of the random masterpiece concept: i.e., that any chimpanzee will eventually write *Hamlet* by randomly banging on typewriter keys, assuming the chimp has enough time and typewriter ribbons. Here, however, the granddaddy of all expert systems stands in for its simian forerunner, and... well, you can guess the rest.

Geoffrey Landis's "Ripples in the Dirac Sea" may be the most poetic work in the collection. Simultaneously haunting and compelling, the story has a Kafkaesque sense of inevitable tragedy. The protagonist, who is alternately victim and victimizer, initiate and sage, is a time traveller whose ultimate fate was not exactly foreordained, but not quite the inevitable byproduct of his own actions. The catalyzing plot point—his inescapable fate—is a traditional leitmotif reformulated as a high-tech reality; it is the myth of Sisyphus, the inescapable bad dream playing on an endless loop. Yet, although the piece is

dominated by sensations of impotence and ineluctability, Landis poignantly accents the beauty that the protagonist still encounters on his transmutational hope. His life—like any other—is a strange mix of déjà vu and disorientation, sweetness, and sorrow.

Landis's "Ripples in the Dirac Sea" also offers an interesting reflection of the evolution of contemporary science fiction. "Dirac Sea" is a potential "crossover" piece, a story that could easily have found its way into one of the more daring mainstream fiction magazines. Although certainly science fiction, the "science" at its heart is comprised of only one scientific, metaphorically-charged concept. However, although the concept is well-described, the machinery of its actualization remains unexplained—as indeed it can be, since its operating principles are not essential to the story.

Elizabeth Ann Scarborough's chapter from *The Healer's War* evinces a hybrid pedigree of sf and lit-fic influences. Gritty reminiscences of Vietnam are amalgamated with mysticism. The acting, which at first consideration might seem too sensitive a spot for exploratory speculation, proves to be fecund ground for Scarborough's grim, hard-boiled ironies and bittersweet moments of symbolic redemption. The protagonist, an army nurse, is the wielder of an amulet with strange healing powers, nonetheless finds her humanitarian efforts dwarfed by the incessant destruction that characterized the Vietnam conflict. Even though the included chapter does not depict choppers spewing missiles or rotary machine-guns chopping through bamboo and bodies, it seems natural to juxtapose the protagonist's small acts of compassion with these monstrous visual memories that have become an enduring feature of America's cultscape. And it may be the dramatic tension between the brutal impersonality of the conflict that surrounds the narrator and the intimacy of her narration that gives *The Healer's War* its strange, unsettling energy.

The excerpted chapter offers a handy example of this thematic tension. While the pawns of capitalism and communism are murdering each other somewhere else in the dripping bush, the protagonist and her paraplegic charge stumble upon a small village, whose inhabitants are about to be attacked by a most improbable enemy: a snake of truly epic proportions. Although the snake is defeated in a close and grimy struggle, the victory is bittersweet, at best; the snake was the traditional yin to the townspeople's yang. Its passing is mourned, a metaphor for the demise of the traditional Vietnamese way of life. And, buried just beneath this metaphor, is the deeper allegorical value of the event, which counterpoints the simplistic, linear good-bad value system of the West with the cyclic Eastern perspective: a dynamically reconfigurable relativity that balances all concepts and objects. Scarborough's deft handling of prose, along with her reflections on the writing of *The Healer's War*, mark this novel as yet another bridge between the once separate islands of mainstream and science fiction.

Gardner Dozois's dark fiction, "Solace," offers readers a sad future and a sadder protagonist. A soul-dead character in a soulless world, Gardner's protagonist is a virtuoso of virtual-reality torture, a man-beast-monster who brings the romanticized elements of the cyberpunk universe into clear, grim focus. Mind meddling is the province of corporate controlled specialists, not jacked-in, juiced-up black-leather boys. Shadowed by overtones of Ambrose Bierce, this is a post-national world of grays and shades, a tired world, where pain is what most inhabitants know they are alive.

Because the protagonist is so emotionally hollowed, so exhausted spiritually and physically, the world overshadows him, looms larger—but much less welcome—than life. But whereas this might defeat other stories, this works to accentuate the central theme in "Solace": the complete loss of individual effectuality. And in the case of the protagonist, he has lost even the most basic of all human capacities—the ability to distinguish reality from (in this case, electronically-induced) illusions.

While some critics might maintain that this is hardly new ground, "Solace" blends mood, technology, and characterization to create a succinct yet convincing vision of an actual, rather than allegorical, dystopia. As such, the analogous mainstream metaphors which reside in works by Kafka, Brecht, and Bellow (to select a few diverse examples) are only the progenitors, not identical antecedents, of what Dozois accomplishes in "Solace." His metaphors and images are powerful, forward-

looking, pertinent. A strictly mainstream attempt would be compelled to draw upon today's restricted possibilities—and because of that, would fail.

Of all the works in *Nebula Awards 25*, Lois McMaster Bujold's novella, "The Mountains of Mourning," shows the strongest Campbellian Golden Age pedigree. A good yarn that is given depth by a number of interesting ethical questions, and given punch by a different sort of murder mystery, "Mountains of Mourning" also includes many of the standbys of classical sf: the idealistic young officer of the Imperial Service, the juxtaposition of starflight and travel on horseback, and the grim legacies of a painfully-recalled Armageddon that threatened humanity.

Familiar elements and, therefore, less exciting? Not at all; "The Mountains of Mourning" was singularly appealing and refreshing because it was *fun*. Bujold writes with style, verve, and in good, old-fashioned, likable prose; a reader senses no hidden stylistic agendas, no conscious attempts to scale and summit the contemporary acmes of narrative construction. Bujold sets out to tell a straightforward story about believable characters in an unusual setting, alternately entertaining and challenging us along the way. She achieves these "simple" objectives with deceptive ease and élan.

"The Mountains of Mourning" is part of the Miles Vorkosigan (and family) saga, a series of books and stories which includes *Borders of Infinity*, *The Var Game*, and *Barravur*. Fans of that series will certainly enjoy this novella, but even aficionados of the genre's most avant-garde offerings may find Bujold's storytelling abilities to be irresistibly engaging. If so, it tends to reinforce the perspective that sf writers need not cleave closer to the mainstream elite in order to create good stories, they simply need to be good writers. "The Mountains of Mourning" proves that Bujold is one of that number.

"For I Have Touched the Sky" is another of Mike Resnick's Kirinyaga tales, in which transplanted members of Kenya's Kikuyu tribe endeavor to continue their traditional ways on a new planet.

"For I Have Touched the Sky" is a sad, insightful retelling of the Icarus legend (or rather, its Kikuyu analog) with a potent gender-issue twist. Resnick's prose and noteworthy ability to adopt the voice and mindset of his usual narrator—the tribe's technomage *mundumaga*, Koriba—is up to its customary standard of excellence.

Resnick's thematic focus illustrates one of the ways in which sf authors have routinely outstripped their mainstream relatives: the exploration of different cultures and species. In this case, Resnick's tale has a powerful contemporary impact and readers may find themselves understanding, through epiphanies, African issues and emotions that no textbook or news report—or Western mainstream novel—could ever adequately convey to them.

Connie Willis takes us to a "movie" "At the Rialto," and while she's at it, takes us for a ride through the improbable-sounding probabilities of quantum physics, Valley-girls, and synchronicity-as-determinism. Whether Willis intends her theme to be a springboard for an energetic romp through an offbeat narrative experiment, or vice versa, is probably not important. At least, it's not likely to be any more important than Myra Loy's footprints, chaos, joules, or charming men named David, all of which are integral to the plot—such as it is. "At the Rialto" is enjoyable, nutty, makes a point of making few points, and is probably not from this dimension—which is just fine by me.

John Crowley's "In Blue" is an ambitious, occasionally-demanding portrayal of the endgame of a post-American Great Society predicated upon a philosophy best described as Mao's Cultural Revolution meets Asimov's Psychohistory gone mad.

In some ways, Crowley's dystopic vision is even more intensely claustrophobic than Orwell's 1984. Here, the tyrant is an overarching belief in the predictability of all occurrences, and the enemy is not an external Big Brother but a conceptual virus inside the protagonist's head. This creates a horrifying duality, a schizophrenia between the dominant made-man and the suppressed real-man that finds the nonlinear, disorderly lines of pre-prediction era art poignant, evocative, and mysteriously compelling.

What makes this story so ambitious for the author—and challenging for the reader—is Crowley's faithful attempt to recreate the thinking and motivation of the inhabitants of this world. His characters are convinced that all events, all thoughts, all actions, are linked in a matrix of causality, a strange hybrid of linear and cyclic thought that intrinsically prevents disruption arising from dissenters who would suggest that the Emperor is not wearing clothes; such a perception was foreordained, and therefore, integral to the unfolding of social reality.

The reader may find himself as stifled by this endlessly regressive ball of yarn as is the protagonist, a rebel at war with not only his society, but his own acculturated psychology. "In Blue" is likely to leave you feeling distressed, disoriented, and deeply in need of a brain-nurse. Reading the story is not exactly a pleasant experience, but that is not its intent nor the seat of its power—a fact which Crowley never loses sight of.

The poetry included in *Nebula Awards 25* is diverse and interesting. John M. Ford's "Winter Solstice, Camelot Station" is a particularly enjoyable fusion of the Arthurian legends and locomotive imagery.


However, the most notable aspect of the poetry is its fundamental congruence to mainstream offerings. Robert Frazier's "Salinity" and Bruce Boston's "In the Darkened Hours" deal with (in vastly simplified terms) cellular evolution and the nature of dreams respectively. Nothing in either moves the reader beyond the bounds of contemporary reality or perception, although both strike their poetic sparks by scraping everyday objects against the flintstone of a wider, or uncommon, perspective. Does this mean that sf is becoming mainstream? Or mainstream, sf?

I've saved "The Omnamatidium Miniatures," Bishop's own *Nebula*-nominated short story, for last because it may offer the best answer to the preceding question.

"The Omnamatidium Miniatures" offers an intimate look at both the microverse around us and the mind of the first human to explore it. The prose is artful, the twists interesting, the structure innovative and well-laced with flitting shadows of understated dark humor. However, the most compelling feature of "The Omnamatidium Miniatures" is its self-contained symbology.

The protagonist, the tele-operator of the world's first remote-controlled microscopic machine, is an introvert involved in the ultimately reductive experience, and fittingly, science becomes the metaphor for diving into oneself. Whether from the scientific or psychological perspective, the dominant focus is on the futility of attempting to touch the smallness—rather than the bigness—of infinity. Bishop's story offers us the mechanical—and mental—rendition of the eternal halving paradox, in which a number can be halved an infinite number of times yet still not be infinitely small. "The Omnamatidium Miniatures" is a reminder that even the smallest probing instrument is unavoidably comprised of materials more elusive and microscopic than those which it is designed to measure. And the same, alas, is true regarding human self-awareness and understanding.

Whether Bishop's primary intent is literal or allegorical is not really at issue; readers are free to take their pick. However, Bishop's ability to create this particular super-metaphor is as dependent upon the palette of possibilities inherent to the sf genre as it is upon his ability as a literary craftsman.

And that may be the primary developing trend in sf—that its conceptual and thematic palette is being more thoroughly explored, and exploited, by writers from both sides of the mainstream-sf genre rift. *Nebula Awards 25* is a microcosmic view of the increasing breadth of sf and the different type of writers who are becoming involved in its creation. Clearly, today's sf story need not be set in the far future, nor involve interstellar or time travel, nor be decorated with high-tech window dressing. Largely because of that, a new breed of sf writer is arising. These are writers who refuse to dwell wholly in, or be identified wholly with, either genre, writers who might be called ground-breaking explorers—or half-breed rebels. It all depends upon your point of view. 

Charles E. Gannon lives in Suffern, New York

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C. S. Lewis and Scientific Romance

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tradition, wrote several important war stories, including "The Land Ironclads" and *The War in the Air*. Future war stories were to remain a vital component of scientific romance throughout its history, and might be regarded as the hard core of the genre.

Inevitably, the fascination with new technologies and their possible impact on society which the future war story encouraged spilled over into other kinds of story. The emergent genre was much enlivened by input drawn from the popular scientific journalism of the day, which abounded in speculative essays celebrating new discoveries in science and their possible implications. H. G. Wells began his literary career with such exercises in scientific journalism, and the imaginative premises used in his most famous scientific romances all emerged from flights of fantasy first couched in the form of essays—the gradual evolution of *The Time Machine* from an essay-like form to the story with which we are now familiar has been well-documented. As well as being the father-figure of scientific romance Wells also pioneered the discipline of futurology in *Anticipations*. Charles Howard Hinton, who published two volumes entitled *Scientific Romances* mingled therein essays and stories, while the French astronomer Camille Flammarion—a prolific writer of articles for the popular magazines—was one of the major influences on catastrophist fantasies of the day. This connection between scientific romance and speculative essays was retained throughout the history of the genre.

In the work of the boldest writers of pre-1914 scientific romance there was a distinctive visionary element, perhaps best exemplified by Wells's *The Time Machine*, William Hope Hodgson's *The House on the Borderland* and John Beresford's *The Hampdenshire Wanderer*. Such stories as these attempt to place the world of contemporary man in a new cosmic perspective, derived from modern discoveries about the true size and time-scale of the universe. Many writers deliberately set out in stories of this kind to displace the traditional ideas of the nature of the universe and man's place within it associated with orthodox religion, and to put in their place something which they considered to be both wiser and finer. It is no coincidence that many writers of scientific romance were the sons of clergymen who became converts to freethought; they set out to use scientific romance as a vehicle for the explanation and justification of their conversion. Five of the twelve major writers studied in my book fall into this category—Griffith, Shiel, Hodgson, Beresford and Heard. In addition, S. Fowler Wright's father was a lay preacher and John Gloag described his father as "painfully religious"; significant minor writers whose fathers were clergymen included Grant Allen, Outcliffe Hyne and Fred T. Jane, and J. Leslie Mitchell also rebelled against parents he considered excessively devout.

On the other hand, it must also be noted that Cyril Ringer Gull, alias Guy Thome, was the son of a clergyman who remained devout, and who employed the imaginative instrumentality of scientific romance to champion the cause of religion against the forces of creeping materialism. Robert Hugh Benson, one of the three literary sons of Archbishop Benson, did likewise in his vivid apocalyptic romance *The Lord of the World*. The best-selling writer of the 1890s, Marie Corelli, also borrowed ideas from contemporary science for redeployment in her curious occult romances which were fervent in their attempts to promote a version of the Christian faith. Some writers central to the tradition of scientific romance, including Shiel and Heard took it as their mission to reconstruct religious faith in such a way as to take aboard the epoch-making discoveries in modern science. Olaf Stapledon, the most important writer in the genre after Wells, adopted such a mission in his later work. It is this thread in the web of the genre which leads directly to the work of C. S. Lewis, the one writer active in the genre who rebelled against the influence of a freethinking father-figure—his fiercely positivist private tutor, W. P. Kirkpatrick—by "regreasing" (his own term) to religious faith.

The preoccupation with future wars which remained central to scientific romance is easy to understand. As a tiny nation with a large worldwide empire inexorably in decline, Britain harboured a strong sense of threat, especially in respect of the imperialistic ambitions of the newly-consolidated German nation. Britons knew that they would eventually have to fight for their foreign possessions against other

European nations, and the Great War was visible on the imaginative horizon for many years before it actually came. This anxiety was mixed with a determination to triumph, a desire to make permanently secure that which was under threat. Much future war fiction before 1914 was therefore belligerent and bloodthirsty.

When the war did come, it arrived having been advertised for many years in fiction and popular journalism alike as a war that would end war, and Britons were all the more eager to fight it because of this pre-established mythology. The actual experience of the war, though, betrayed these expectations in no uncertain terms. It turned out to be the vilest of wars, horrific in its cost in human lives, which achieved nothing save the destruction of Europe as the economic heart of the world.

The writers of post-war scientific romance had to live with this betrayal of their hopes and dreams, and it is entirely understandable that their futuristic imagination thereafter focussed in large measure on what they considered to be the principal historical lesson of the Great War: the conviction that a new war, fought by air fleets which would bomb defenseless cities with high explosives and poison gas, would wreak destruction of a more horrific kind, and on a more terrible scale, than anything previously imaginable. Imagery of this kind features extensively in savagely better novels like Edward Shanks' *People of the Ruins*, Shaw Desmond's *Ragnarok*, Cicely Hamilton's *Theodora Savage*, Neil Bell's *The Gas War of 1940*, John Gloag's *Winter's Town*, Joseph O'Neill's *Day of Wrath* and S. Fowler Wright's trilogy *Prelude in Prague*, *Four Days War* and *Megiddo's Ridge*.

Alongside these works, however, the positive and visionary elements in scientific romance did survive, although there was an interval in the 1920s when they were very subdued indeed, featuring to good effect only in E. V. Odle's *The Clockwork Man*. It is notable that this interval corresponded with the brief flourishing of a particular kind of sentimental fantasy which presented magic as a life-enhancing antidote to the spiritual dereliction of modern life. Vivid novels promoting this view, all published within a few years of one another in the decade following the end of the war, include Stella Benson's *Living Alone*, Gerald Bullett's *Mr Godly Beside Himself*, Margaret Irwin's *Three Mortals*, Hope Mirrelees' *Lud-in-the-21st*, and Lord Dunsany's *The King of Elfland's Daughter*.

Scientific romance was continually enlivened, and thereby saved from being dull or imaginatively unambitious, by input from essays in speculative science. Wells, in his work in this vein, was carrying forward and strengthening a tradition which was as much intellectual play as anything else—a toying with ideas which was largely abstracted and amused; a variety of armchair philosophizing. After the Great War it extended through the works of such writers as J. B. S. Haldane and Julian Huxley. Haldane's startling anticipation of a new revolution in biotechnology in his pamphlet *Daedalus; or Science and the Future* called forth ideological replies in the same profusion as Chesney's *Battle of Dorking*, headed by Bertrand Russell's *Liars, or the Future of Science*. Haldane had argued that new biotechnologies would give us the means to solve the problem of feeding the world's population, and would also give us the means to control that population; Russell countered with the argument that the principal result of scientific progress was to give men scope to indulge their "collective passions," and that as men's collective passions were mostly evil, scientific progress was therefore a bad thing.

These two essays became the foundation-stones of a series of "Today & Tomorrow" pamphlets which ultimately ran to more than a hundred volumes issued between 1924 and 1930. Many writers who produced scientific romances between the wars were pushed in that direction by writing "Today & Tomorrow" pamphlets, including Russell, John Gloag, Leslie Mitchell, Muriel Jaeger, Gerald Heard and A. M. Low. Haldane's *Daedalus* is the direct inspiration of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and another of Haldane's essays—"The Last Judgment"—provided the blueprint for Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men*. Another influential series of speculative essays was collected in J. C. Squire's *If It Had Happened Otherwise* (1932), a series of adventures in alternative history whose contributors included G. K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, Harold Nicolson, Fr. Ronald Knox and André Maurois, all of whom also wrote some fiction relevant to the tradition of scientific romance.

The most imaginatively adventurous scientific romances—including Beresford's *The Hampdenshire Wanderer*, Odle's *The Clockwork Man*

John Glog's *Tomorrow's Yesterday* and Murray Constantine's *Proud Man* among them—tend to be rather dreamy works even when they are not, like Stapledon's *Star Maker* or Beresford and Esme Wynne-Tyson's *The Riddle of the Tower*, actual visionary fantasies. They frequently begin in country villages, and very often return full circle, with the initial circumstances restored, so that the world remains essentially undisturbed by the flight of fantasy. This reflects the fact that unlike America, where science fiction writers whose genre had been founded in the popular pulp magazines were boldly setting out to conquer the universe in explosively melodramatic space operas, Britain was a political and cultural entity based in long traditions, where change tended to be seen more in terms of disturbance and disruption than in terms of creation and expansion. Britain's aristocracy had never been swept away, like the *ancien régime* in France, by a revolution, instead, the traditional ruling class retained its prestige and cultural hegemony even though it was being gradually absorbed and usurped by the bourgeoisie and its nouveau riche.

The writers of scientific romance were mostly champions of progress and apologists for new technology, but they had a thorough understanding of the fear of change and disruption that was part of their cultural heritage, and they fully appreciated how enormously difficult it would be to persuade their fellow Britons to accept change. H. G. Wells, perhaps the most eloquent and insistent propagandist for progress the nation ever produced, was continually forced, in both his fictional and non-fictional accounts of the shape of things to come, to suppose that the old order would have to be literally torn down or blasted apart before it could yield to a new.

H. G. Wells dubbed the period following the end of the Great War "The Age of Frustration," and scientific romance between the wars can be regarded as an extraordinary elaboration of that spirit of frustration, which shows up not merely in the pessimistic fantasies of destruction by war, and in such technical analyses of perverted Utopian dreams as Muriel Jaeger's *The Quotation Mark* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, but also in the supposedly optimistic works of the period. When hope for the future is offered in post-war scientific romance it is usually tied to the idea that there might be some kind of miraculous transcendence of the human condition—that a new race might appear, free from the awful psychological hangups which prevent ordinary men from creating a just and satisfactory social order. Images of these "superior beings" can be found in the Amphibians of S. Fowler Wright's *The World Below*, the carpe diem in John Glog's *Tomorrow's Yesterday*, the Utopian supermen of John Beresford's *What Dreams May Come*...? the "Young Men" whose coming was celebrated in M. P. Shiel's last novel, the "elevator man" of Gerald Heard's *Doppelgänger* and many of the future species in Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men*. Such superhumans are always contrasted with our own kind, and the reader of such books is invited—indeed, commanded—to feel humiliated and debased by comparisons. This quasi-nostalgic yearning to be replaced by something better reaches a literally hysterical pitch in Claude Houghton's *Ther Ivar Trent* and becomes the object of cunning black comedy in Andrew MacVell's *Minimum Man*; or *Time to be Gone*.

This, then, is the historical background against which C. S. Lewis's adventures in scientific romance may be set. Lewis's background is not dissimilar to that of several of the other writers who produced scientific romance between the wars. He fought briefly in the Great War. He was wounded in France—probably, like John Glog, by friendly fire. He was, however, less embittered by these experiences than Glog or Neil Bell or Olaf Stapledon, both of whom served as conscientious objectors in the Ambulance Corps, or even John Beresford—who was unfit for military service by virtue of having been crippled in infancy by polio, but who worked as a firefighter in London during the Zeppelin raids.

At Oxford, in the period between the wars, Lewis formed highly significant friendships with scholars and writers who were seriously interested in the tradition of British fantasy fiction, firstly and most importantly with J. R. R. Tolkien, latterly with Charles Williams and Roger Lancelyn Green. He was himself very interested in the allegorical fantasies of the Victorian heretic ex-clergyman George MacDonald and the remarkable metaphysical fantasies of David Lindsay. Partly under the influence of Owen Barfield's book on *Poetic Diction* Lewis became fascinated by the idea of "mythopoeic fiction," and it was this kind of

story which he set out to write in the late thirties when he began *Out of the Silent Planet*. Like Benson and Thorne before him, however, Lewis borrowed the apparatus of scientific romance in order to produce a work which would definitely oppose the main ideological thrust of that genre. He borrowed quite explicitly from H. G. Wells, particularly from *The First Men in the Moon*, but he set out to parody and vitify Wellman ideas about the universality of a Darwinian struggle for existence in which only the fittest could survive—ideas which had seized young Wells's imagination with all the force of revelation when he listened to Thomas Henry Huxley's lectures at the London School of Normal Science in 1887.

In *Out of the Silent Planet* (1938) Ransom, a placid academic, is kidnapped and whisked away to Mars by Weston and Devine, a scientist and a businessman whose roles correspond loosely to those of Cavor and Bedford in *The First Men in the Moon*. Weston is a grotesque straw man whose opinions are partly exaggerated from those of Wells and J. B. S. Haldane, and partly from those of the American science fiction writers who assumed that man's destiny was to be a matter of conquering and colonizing other worlds. In the climactic scene of the novel Weston's ideologies are literally put on trial before a Martian super-being whose task it is to pass judgment on them.

Unlike the ruthless Martians who attempt the rape of the earth in Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, Lewis's Martian third main species of life-forms are essentially gentle, living in quasi-symbiotic harmony with one another under the guidance of non-material beings, the *eldils*, whose creator, Maleldil, has set a kind of spiritual governor, an *Oyarsa*, over each habitable planet in the solar system. Earth's *Oyarsa* is Satanically "bent," and this perversion—aided by the weakness of men—has resulted in Earth becoming a miserable, sin-ridden place which directly needs to be sorted out by some apocalyptic eucatastrophe. This notion of Earth as a uniquely bad place in a morally-ordered universe echoes a similar insistence in Marie Corelli's best-selling occult fantasy *A Romance of Two Worlds*.

Out of the Silent Planet is not a straightforward allegory in which Maleldil "stands for" the Christian God, but as a mythopoeic fiction it endeavors to invent a new myth which has the same essential features as the Christian mythos, and which therefore enshrines a kind of "poetic truth." This poetic truth is explicitly set up to oppose and correct the "false myths" allegedly promoted by so much British scientific romance and American science fiction. The trial in which the two world-views are compared is, however, about as fair as the average Stalinist show trial; the case for Weston's defence is actually put by his prosecutor, Ransom, who "interprets" all his statements for a judge whose prejudice is taken for granted. Given that the book is more a satire than a novel it is not entirely surprising—nor, perhaps, entirely inappropriate—to find mockery substituted for inquiry, but it may be worth noting that in Aldous Huxley's scathing anti-Haldanian satire *Brave New World* Mustapha Mond is allowed to argue his own case against the Savage. The subsequent course of Huxley's novel reveals that, however much the author hated to admit it, the Savage lost. Ransom, in my opinion, would have fared no better in a free and fair exchange of views.

Before Lewis wrote the second novel in what was eventually to become the Ransom trilogy, he produced his ingenious and commercially very successful exercise in Christian apologetics, *The Screwtape Letters*. Like certain other Christian writers—Milton being the obvious example—Lewis found the Devil and his minions to be much more interesting in a literary sense than God and his angels, and his deft analysis of the hypothetical tactics of devilry is carried over into *Perelandra* (1943), which borrows the common science-fictional image of Venus as a watery world for a replay of the story of the Garden of Eden. The beautiful floating islands which are host to an alien Adam and Eve are invaded by Weston, this time in an explicitly Satanic role, and Ransom becomes an agent of the Martian *Oyarsa*, sent to prevent his orchestrating a catastrophic Fall. As befits a novel written and published while the Second World War so long anticipated by writers of scientific romance was actually raging, *Perelandra* features a perfectly literal conflict between good and evil in which Ransom eventually goes in pursuit of Weston and engages him in mortal combat.

The Weston of *Perelandra* is significantly different from the Weston of *Out of the Silent Planet*. His philosophy is no longer Wellman; it reflects instead the visionary aspect of the tradition of scientific

Read This

Recently read and recommended by James Cappio:

Time's Arrow, by Martin Amis (Harmony). A book with a science-fictional gimmick, closely akin to the one that animates Michael Swanwick's short story "Forensight": the narrator is an entity that apparently inhabits the body of one Tod T. Friendly ("Friendly Death"), a Nazi concentration camp doctor, but whose time line is moving backwards. (Perceiving everything backward at least makes German easier to understand, because the verbs all come at the beginning of the sentence.) The conceit requires some genuine tours de force—Amis is particularly adept at conversations that make sense whether read backward or forward—and one detects overtones of Beckett and Wittgenstein, but the most startling effect is the resulting perspective on the Holocaust. The narrator's unique position allows him to write, in all sincerity, a clause such as "On Kristallnacht when we romped and played and helped the Jews"—which, coming right after his conclusion that his host, "as a moral being, is absolutely unexceptional, liable to do what everybody else does, good or bad, with no limit, under the cover of numbers," invites us to do some rather harder thinking than usual about the banality of evil.

Wise Children, by Angela Carter (Farrar Straus Giroux). It's the hundredth birthday of the crown prince of English actors, Melchior Hazard, and the seventy-fifth of his natural but unacknowledged twin daughters Dora and Nora Chance. (The play on "Hazard" and "Chance" typifies the spirit of this book.) The day is the occasion for Dora to recount the twins' life story; Melchior's birthday party is the occasion for—but that would be telling. Carter manages to interweave virtually

every known form of playacting (Dora's motto is "What a joy it is to dance and sing!") into a plot redolent with, and—high praise indeed, but deserved—worthy of Shakespeare, featuring four sets of twins other than Dora and Nora and a budget of mistaken identities. There is even an extended, hilarious interlude in 1930s Hollywood recounting Melchior's ill-starred film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. There is special pleasure in teasing out character allusions to Shakespeare, such as Melchior's twin brother Peregrine, a combination of (at least) Prospero, Falstaff, and Lear.

Angela Carter's death in February 1992 provides this book with an unwanted and melancholy subtext, prefigured, I am sure, in Dora's several references to untimely death. It's all the more remarkable, then, that this is one of the most life-affirming books I have read in a very long time. Recommended without reservation, but be aware that the family tree printed on the endpapers, though quite attractive, is completely misleading.

Harsoun and the Sea of Stories, by Salman Rushdie (Granta Books/Viking Penguin). Could you write *anything* if the Ayatollah had put a price on your head, let alone your version of *The Phantom Tollbooth*? This is what Rushdie has accomplished in a story written for his son. And if one detects a subtext in the tale of a storyteller whose gift is stolen by an empire of darkness whose watchword is silence and whose ruler has the soul of a petty bureaucrat? Well—

The Satanic Verses is now available in paperback. You should buy it, of course, even if you already have the hardcover.

romance, which is interested in the emergence of superhumanity. In particular, Weston appears to have read two extraordinarily vivid visionary scientific romances which were both published in 1937: M. P. Shiel's *The Young Men Are Coming* and Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker*, in any case, his rhetoric is very similar to that found in those two books:

"The majestic spectacle of this blind, inarticulate purposiveness thrusting its way upward and ever upward in an endless unity of differentiated achievements towards an ever-increasing complexity of organisation, towards spontaneity and spirituality, swept away all my old conception of the duty of Man as such. Man in himself is nothing. The forward movement of Life—the growing spirituality—is everything. . . . To spread spirituality, not to spread the human race, is henceforth my mission. This sets the coping-stone on my career. I worked first for myself; then for science; but now at last for Spirit itself—I might say, borrowing language which will be more familiar to you, the Holy Spirit." (U.S. ed. 91-92)

Both Shiel and Stapledon were fervently unorthodox deists, but their beliefs were significantly different. Shiel had a quasi-Nietzschean interest in moving beyond conventional ideas of good and evil—in which good is characterized negatively as an absence of evil—to a philosophy of progress which would have a positive idea of good reflecting the most life-enhancing of possible moralities. Stapledon, attempting in *Star Maker* to follow the age-old programme of trying to comprehend the nature of God by a patient study of his Creation, struggled hopelessly to resist a quasi-Schopenhauerian pessimism encouraged by his conclusion that God was either incompetent or sadistic or both. Lewis, needless to say, consigns Weston's combination of both heresies to the same bin, aided by his faith-given conviction that Christianity already has a divinely-inspired notion of good, and by his Cerebellous conviction that the universe outside the earth must surely

be replete with God-given virtue and harmony. When Weston is finally destroyed, *Perelandra* develops into a rhapsodic celebration of Malediv's creativity and the essential morality of matter which presumably aspires to present a mythopoetic "correction" of the visionary sequences in *Star Maker* and *The Young Men Are Coming*.

The book which completes the Ransom trilogy, *That Hideous Strength* (1945), is not really the same kind of novel as its predecessors. It is strongly influenced by the metaphysical thrillers of Charles Williams, and Ransom here becomes a kind of Williamsesque magus, surrendering centre stage to flawed characters of human dimension. Weston is entirely absent, although his one-time henchman Devine now appears as part of a sinister organisation known by the ironic acronym N.I.C.E., which is secretly run by demons. Wells is parodied here in the author Jules, but the ideas for which Devine is used as a mouthpiece may be a caricature of ideas allegedly espoused by Lewis's fellow Oxford academic Peter Medawar. Again the idea of an emergent New Man so beloved by Shiel, Heard and other contemporary writers of scientific romance is portrayed as something demonically-inspired:

"The Institute . . . is for something better than housing and vaccinations and faster trains and curing the people of cancer. It is for the conquest of death: or for the conquest of organic life, if you prefer. They are the same thing. It is to bring out of that cocoon of organic life which sheltered the babyhood of mind the New Man, the man who will not die, the artificial man, free from Nature. Nature is the ladder we have climbed up, now we kick her away." (U.S. ed. p. 202)

This determination to find an earthly salvation through the application of human engineering is, of course, utterly horrible to Lewis, who can only see such a prospect as a betrayal of divinely-determined destiny, and hence as a route to damnation. The saviour who comes to rescue Earth from the designs of N.I.C.E. is Melin, the representative of an all-

purpose syncretic mythology into which the myths of the *eldritch* and the *Olympians* has now been absorbed. That *Hidous Strength* thus provides a bridge between Lewis's scientific romances—or perhaps one should rather call them antiscientific romances—and the last of Lewis's mythopoetic novels, the excellent Classical fantasy *Till We Have Faces*.

Lewis wrote his scientific romances at a time when the genre was about to be swamped and dissolved by the flood of imported American science fiction—something which might have happened some years earlier but for the depredations of the German U-boats and the wartime paper shortages which dramatically distorted the evolution of British popular culture between 1939 and 1947. This not to say, though, that the legacy of scientific romance were entirely to waste; thanks to the advent of the atom bomb American science fiction after 1945 became possessed by an anxiety not dissimilar to that which had haunted British scientific romance between the war, and the rise of this anxiety was paralleled a similar renewal of interest in the possible evolution of a new race of men less prone to self-destruction. At the same time, the death of the pulp magazines aided the literary sophistication of American science fiction, under the aegis of such new vehicles as *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. (Lewis contributed three stories to *FFSIF*, in the last of which an astronaut taking that giant leap for mankind which Neil Armstrong claimed to have made comes face to face with Medusa.)

The writers who began to contribute to the new British of magazines included several who were well aware of the tradition of British scientific romance and consciously conserved its traditions within the more complex weave of the genre which had absorbed it. John Wyndham and Brian Aldiss are two conspicuous examples; later ones include the younger John Middleton Murry, who wrote of as Richard Cowper, and Christopher Priest.

Having acknowledged all this, though there remains a sense in which scientific romance was already in decline and had attained a state of decadence close to exhaustion, before it was overtaken and absorbed. Lewis's work reflects more clearly than anyone else's—although Gerald Heard's displays a similar malaise and much the same pattern of development—the extent to which the central ideologies of scientific romance had lost their fashionability. Wells's Age of Frustration reached its crisis during the years of World War II, and although the near-universal assumption that the clauses of the Geneva Convention banning chemical warfare would not be honoured proved unjustified, the bugbear of poison gas was simply replaced by the even more horrific bugbear of the atomic bomb. The manner in which the Second World War was concluded seemed to those writers who had devoted much time and energy to contemplation of the future to be a sick joke; a mocking postponement of an ignominious end which now seemed more inevitable than ever.

Just as the decade following the close of World War I had seen a decisive shift of literary endeavour away from the earnest speculations of scientific romance towards frankly supernatural romances, so the decade following the close of World War II saw an exactly similar shift, reflected in such works as Lewis's *Till We Have Faces*, Heard's *The Black Fox*, John Cowper Powys's *Parus*, Mervyn Wall's *The Unfortunate Fury*, Vaughan Williams' *Valley Beyond Time* and, of course, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. These works, all of which provide very eloquent, if sometimes eccentrically indirect, advocacy for an essentially religious viewpoint respectful of spiritual values, contrast very sharply with the last few scientific romances, which range in tone from the sad defeatism of H. de Vere Scepcoole's *The Story of My Village* and the bitter irony of Stapledon's *A Man Divided* to the macabre nihilism of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. What C. S. Lewis's scientific romances did was simply to lead the way into this post-war period; if they have any claim at all to be called prophetic, this is the sense in which they might warrant such a label.

Given what happened in the wake of World War I, this decay of scientific romance into what I earlier called a kind of senility, was perhaps an inevitable tragedy, and it was of course an understandable tragedy—but I do want to argue, by way of conclusion, that our understanding of how it came about should not be allowed to distract us from the fact that it was a tragedy.

Now that the passage of time has hopefully freed us to contemplate these matters more carefully and more objectively, less burdened by the hysteria of the moment, I think we ought to be able to see that even if

Weston's ideas were misguided—and became even more misguided as his career progressed—they were not nearly as foolish as Ransom's. We should be prepared to admit that modern science and technology are not, even metaphorically, the product of some demonic plot to bring about our damnation, but are in fact the only real sources of hope for our eventual survival and salvation from the many evils which plague us.

For what it may be worth, the kind of reaction against his ideas which moved Huxley and Lewis is anticipated by Haldane in the preface to *Dreadful*, where he notes that "biological inventions" always seem at first to be a violation of nature, and thus tend to be considered blasphemous, although in time they come to be so taken for granted that they appear to their users to be intrinsic to the idea of nature which they seemed at first to violate. This is true. In my essay "Mankind in the Third Millennium," which interested readers can find reprinted in my short-story collection *Sexual Chemistry: Sordid Tales of the Genetic Revolution*, I point out that our modern ways of thinking and talking about technology obscure the key role which biotechnologies have played in human progress—whose first great revolutions were brought about by the development of agriculture and the domestication of the horse. If we are to take the evidence of palaeontology and archaeology seriously—as we surely must unless we are to don that absurd pair of ideological blinkers devised by Philip Gosse in *Omphalos*—we must recognise that what we nowadays think of as human nature is not the gift of a hypothetical God, but the gift of ancient discoveries in biotechnology. I believe that the kind of calculated attempt to demonise science in general and biotechnology in particular which we find in the Ransom trilogy is not merely misguided but actively dangerous.

The Age of Frustration has not ended. Despite the recent end of the Cold War, the spectre of nuclear war still overhangs the modern world, and it will not go away. Nor is it the only apocalyptic spectre which now looms up on the imaginative horizon of that future in which we and our children will live our lives. War is everywhere, albeit smouldering rather than blazing in most of the developed nations. Famine is spreading throughout the Third World on an unprecedented scale. Pestilence is making a grand comeback in such familiar guises as malaria and cholera, and producing such new malevolent forms as AIDS. These three horsemen would be bad enough were they riding without a fourth companion, but they are not. The worst plague which currently threatens the world is a plague of people, which constantly outraces all the other checks, and brings in its wake a more spectacular and less easily reversible dereliction of the environment than any plague of rats or locusts ever could. The fourth horseman of the contemporary apocalypse is Death, but not the merely human death which is the visitation of its three companions; it is the death of the world itself.

There are people who claim that the destruction of the Earth's ecosphere is a side-effect of modern technology, but that is false. All tools are by definition facilitating, and some technologies do indeed facilitate the destruction of the environment by making it easier to accomplish, but tools have no purposes of their own and they are certainly not necessary to the business of destruction. The ecocatastrophes which overwhelmed the territory which is now the Sahara desert and the place we once called Easter Island were achieved with extremely primitive technologies; all they required was a simple superabundance of people. Nor is it true that the blame for the genocidal tendencies which human history reveals with such horrible clarity are the result of scientific philosophy and technological sophistication. As Lewis must have known when he carefully prevented Weston from mounting his own defence during the trial sequences in *Out of the Silent Planet*, the worst genocides and ecocatastrophes recorded in history were committed by Christian men, who justified their horrific actions by claiming that they were serving the Christian cause.

The only hope which exists for the salvation of the world requires a twofold evolution of contemporary abilities and attitudes. On the one hand, we must evolve biotechnologies which will give us much better control over the earth's ecosphere; technologies which will allow us to manage that ecosphere efficiently and rationally. Without such technologies, there is no way that we can establish a prudent

newardship of the planet whose surface we inhabit. These technologies are of the kind whose eventual evolution J. B. S. Haldane brilliantly foresaw in his essay *Dardanis*, which C. S. Lewis loathed so fervently. On the other hand, we must learn to practise what T. R. Malpas, in the second edition of his celebrated *Essay on Population*, called "moral restraint"—which is to say that we must limit the growth of the human population, strategically and strictly. Malpas did not advocate birth control as a means to that end, probably because he, like many other sound philosophers, lived in fear of the ideological terrorism of religious men, who have always abhorred such ideas. If the world is to be saved, this terrorism must be put down; if not actually extirpated religious faith must somehow be transformed into a much less pernicious form. This will not be accomplished easily, because the gods worshipped by the major world religions are fiercely jealous gods, which ardently desire to maintain their traditional monopoly on the business of salvation. Their advocates, among the cleverest and most eloquent of whom C. S. Lewis must certainly be reckoned, have always done their utmost to devalue the only kind of salvation which can actually take effect in the real world—the salvation offered by technological and political progress—in favour of a grandiose, and to my mind rather horrible, lie which promises a salvation after death to those who strive hardest in the cause of frustrating salvation in life.

As a historian of the scientific romance, I can understand the terrible frustration which the later contributors to this genre came to feel. In the beginning, they entertained wonderful hopes and dared to believe—foolishly, I admit—that even a Great War might serve the ends

of progress by sweeping away an old, corrupt world order to make way for a new one. I can understand why, when they found those hopes betrayed by the stubborn blindness of their contemporaries, they began to look forward to a day when those blind and stupid contemporaries might be replaced by a wiser and morally superior kind of man. I can understand their terror when they were forced to confront the probability that their contemporaries might destroy themselves and the whole world before such a new race had the chance to emerge. I can even understand the seductive force of the false hope that redemption from these cruel circumstances might be attained by a reinvestment of faith in a Church which did at least recommend that people should try to be nice to one another, even though the vast majority of its members had never practised what they preached. I can understand all of this—but I cannot sympathise with it.

As a practising science fiction writer, more specifically as one who aspires to carry forward the eclipsed tradition of British scientific romance within the broader genre which dissolved it, I believe—passionately and devoutly—that my task is to attack as fervently and as cleverly as I can the kind of intellectual folly which is promulgated in the didactic fictions of C. S. Lewis, and thus to make what contribution I can—however small—to the casting down of those idols of faith which obscure clear sight of the dire threats which currently face the world and the way to their alleviation. ▽

Brian Stableford lives in Reading, England.

War Fever by J. G. Ballard

New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1991; \$18.95 hc; 176 pages

reviewed by Bruce Holland Rogers

Norman Spinrad once noted that J. G. Ballard's three mid-seventies novels, *Crash*, *Concrete Island*, and *High Rise*, seemed to have purged Ballard of some of his obsessions and cleared the way for *Empire of the Sun*. Spinrad may be right, but those purged obsessions were not permanently expelled from Ballard's psyche. One of the most interesting characteristics of *War Fever* is the continuing repetition of familiar material, some of it going back to Ballard's earliest stories. Ballard gives his readers dead astronauts, assassinated messiahs, urban primitives, and figures who blur the distinction between psychiatric patient and psychiatrist. He even shows signs of postmodern reflexivity, using a sentence from a prior work as the foundation for a new story, growing his new fiction from the language of the old. For all these revisitations of old turf, though, Ballard continues to make his work new by seeing his old obsessions afresh, and sometimes by packaging them in unconventional storytelling techniques.

Ballard's tendency to repeat himself is clearest in the case of the dead-astronaut tale. In two much earlier stories, "The Cage of Sand" (1962) and "The Dead Astronaut" (1968), Ballard wrote about characters waiting at a deserted Caranaval for the return of a dead astronaut whose vehicle would burn up on re-entry and crash within miles of its launch site. In each of these stories, returning astronauts bring a plague, or some plague-like condition, home to earth. (It's radioactive contamination in "The Dead Astronaut.") Ballard uses the situation again in "Memories of the Space Age," a *War Fever* story that first appeared in 1982, but the result is not as predictable as it may sound. Each time that he writes about this scenario, Ballard alters the circumstances of the astronaut's death, the motives of the waiting characters, and a lot of minor but interesting details. "Memories of the Space Age" is distinct and suspenseful—it makes no difference at all that the basic scenario will be familiar to Ballard's fans.

As other stories will show, though, it doesn't take familiarity with Ballard's earliest work to track his fixations. A repetition that will be obvious even to readers who have read no earlier Ballard is the theme of the assassinated messiah, employed three times in *War Fever*. The most conventionally structured messiah story, "The Object of the Attack," unravels an assassination plot against an American astronaut, leader of an authoritarian religious movement. The story is narrated by the would-be assassin's psychiatrist and is about, among many things,

perceptual disorientation, suggesting with subtlety that the narrator may not be entirely reliable.

The messiah theme is replayed less conventionally in "Answers to a Questionnaire," a story narrated entirely through responses to one hundred numbered questions. In the absence of the questions, the answers make for some funny juxtapositions, some interesting ambiguities, and a very compressed telling of the tale.

"The Index" is also an inventive bit of storytelling. The messianic figure here is Henry Rhodes Hamilton, friend, advisor, and gadfly to political leaders and pop culture figures, and the document that tells his tale is the index of his autobiography. Both Hamilton and the book might be inventions of the indexer, Bronislaw Zielinski, who might himself be an invention. On the other hand, Hamilton, the book, and Zielinski might all be casualties of a conspiracy to erase Hamilton from official memory. In its funny paranoia and inventive form, this story is like a scaled-down version of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pink Fire*, a novel written as the scholarly footnotes to a poem.

It should be obvious that this kind of thematic repetition is anything but boring or predictable.

There are other combinations of old material. The banker who narrates "The Enormous Space" has seen his personal life collapse after a car crash (another Ballard fixation). The crash was the first of several dislocations that ended with the character's divorce. This thoroughly alienated Mr Ballantyne resolves never to leave his apartment again. He becomes an urban primitive, a bit like the characters of Ballard's novel *High Rise*, with the important distinction that Mr Ballantyne perceives his deteriorating lodgings as an expanding universe of brilliant light and space, unbearably huge and empty. This private reality is another recurring Ballard theme, though it's more often time that gets distorted than space.

A very different re-working of earlier material appears in the story "Notes Towards a Mental Breakdown," which begins with an eighteen-word synopsis of the story itself and then proceeds, through footnotes, to explicate that synopsis. The title of this story was itself a sub-title for one of Ballard's "compressed novels" in *The Atrocity Exhibition*. Like many pieces in that collection, "Notes Towards a Mental Breakdown" is about a character who is part patient and part psychiatrist, but the particular events and characters of this tale are new—except, of course,

that some of the images owe something to earlier work: low-flying aircraft and crashes and marital infidelities.

In all, about half of this book is an obvious retelling of the yarns that Ballard has been spinning all along. In that respect, *War Fever* is a bit like Robert Coover's *Prickings and Descants*, which was a collection of stories about the process of retelling familiar tales. The difference is that Coover apparently thinks that repeating himself is hard work. Ballard, on the other hand, seems perfectly comfortable with the prospect of repetition. And unlike so many writers who try technical tricks to restore life to "exhausted" material, Ballard keeps his eye on the original intent of telling a story told. That may be one advantage to starting out in a commercial genre—once adopted, the drive to tell a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end is hard to shake. Even at his most "experimental," Ballard still tells a story. (Even in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Ballard's most challenging short fiction, there's still a much stronger thread of coherence than you'll find in a lot of "experimental" fiction).

Nor all of the successful stories in this collection are so obviously reworkings of previous images. "War Fever" is a story set in a near-future Beirut where constant civil war still rages. The world is otherwise at peace, but wants the Beirut firefighters to stay for its own purposes. "Report on an Unidentified Space Station" is set in an artificial universe like Jorge Luis Borges's "Library of Babel," but this contrived universe is expanding. Neither of these stories is freighted with a lot of earlier Ballard baggage. Nor are the two most powerful stories in the collection, stories that are only *because* they are appearing in an *sf* writer's collection. (That's reason enough to call them *sf*, though. Encountering them in *War Fever*, you read them like *sf*. If you first read them in, say

the *Paris Review*, you wouldn't call them *sf*, but they wouldn't be the same stories, either. What you expect has a lot to do with what you get.) The stories "The Air Disaster" and "The Man Who Walked on the Moon" are both psychological horror written in a style that might be termed "Latin Gothic."

The only real disappointments here are some of the stories that grew out of recent events and current pop culture personalities: "The Secret History of World War 3," about America's fixation with Ronald Reagan's health in his third, post-Bush term; "Love in a Colder Climate," about AIDS-inspired sexuality; and "The Largest Theme Park in the World," about Europe's penchant for authoritarian nationalism in spite of all this blather over unity. None of these is really a bad story, but all of them share a slightly out-of-date feel, like last year's political cartoons. It isn't just the exploitation of recent events that's the problem. It seems, instead, to be Ballard's breezy handling of this material combined with the superficiality of the pop icons invoked. Ballard himself remarked, in the notes for a re-issued *Atrocity Exhibition*, that he couldn't imagine writing about Princess Di. He might have done well to trust that impulse. Even Ronald Reagan as president isn't the icon that he was as California governor in the 1960s—video tapes of his older speeches seem oddly dislocated from this universe, so it's hard to employ him as Ballard did in earlier work.

Even with a few stories that feel so oddly dated, this is a collection worth reading. Ballard has mastered a lot of different kinds of story telling, including what might be called "original *sf* *à la* ru." ▴

Bruce Holland Rogers lives in Champaign, Illinois.

Universe 2 edited by Robert Silverberg and Karen Haber

New York: Bantam Books, 1992; \$22.00 hc; 397 pages

reviewed by John Clute

It is books like this which make you come out in urges. Spring, which has just arrived with its flower stuff, may be a contributing factor. But all I know is, there is this terrible urge. It is as though I were the young man in Cannes at the beginning of P.G. Wodehouse's *The Luck of the Bodkins* (1935), into whose face has "crept a look of furtive shame, the shifty, hangdog look which announces that an Englishman is about to talk French," because what I'd really like to do right now is define science fiction. April is the cruellest month.

All the same, the vastness of the contents of *Universe 2*—the second of a new series of original anthologies edited by Robert Silverberg and Karen Haber with a memorial eye on Terry Carr, who created the first *Universe* series in 1971 and ran it until #17 in 1987, the year of his death—does make you think. There are 22 stories in the current volume. All of them are easy to recognize as *sf*, each of them being a tale we know to be *sf* when we point to it (the ability to point being half the battle). At the same time, however, though most of the 22 stories inhabit worlds which feel very much like *sf* worlds, none of them engages more than tangentially in the kind of mental articulation traditionally central to most definitions of the genre. They do not seem to extrapolate. They do not massage implications of one science or another into some new thing. They are *sf*, in other words, but do not seem to *do it*.

More recent definitions of *sf* go some way, of course, to accommodate tales of this order. Darko Suvin's menu for writing like Lens—*that sf is a postlapsarian mating of cognition and estrangement within the format of a novum*—is challengingly useful (though bats), but does not pretend to convey the experience of being a character (or an empathetic reader) in an *sf* world: exchequing, as it does, both nostalgia (for *sf* is a romance genre) and *kinesis* (because *sf* characters want something out of the worlds they inhabit, and act to obtain their desires). As one reads the 22 stories assembled in *Universe 2*, therefore, certain questions come to mind. What (one wonders) are all these characters *doing*, because they are certainly not doing *sf* in the old way? What do they *want*, because they certainly don't want to own the consequences of their cognition, the way Kim Kinnison or Hari Seldon did?

Sf, Kim Stanley Robinson said a few years ago, is "an historical

literature.... In every *sf* narrative, there is an explicit or implicit fictional history that concerns the period depicted to our present moment, or to some moment of our past." At the end of an entry on *sf* contributed to a forthcoming *Oxford Guide to 20th Century Literature*, I quoted this. I went on to say (in very different words) that in this passage Robinson had underlined the sense American *sf* conveyed of being connected to the logic—to the charged umbilical—of the world. That the energies so accumulated were discharged *futurewards* in tales which one might call genres of free history.

But the tales which piggyback these genres, and the characters who meat-puppet their commands, were not free to violate the moment or the year. (We are not describing fantasy.) In 1992, *sf* could be defined as that body of tales which frees 1992. *Sf* is free history. The frame is constant, the tale inside the tales of changes, as the years pass. In 1942, *sf* was just beginning to agitate the Lightning Out perceived by the Pantheists as Transcendence (and which I, for one, continue to think of as Edisonian grease: which is another story), and the inner tale of *sf* was a tale of empire (hence Asimov's *Foundation*). In 1952, it was hubris (*Galaxy*, Simak). In 1962, solipsism (Dick, Heinlein). In 1972, retribution (Disch). In 1982, memory (Wolfe). In 1992, the inner tale of *sf* is a tale of exogamy.

As some of the stories assembled in *Universe 2* make clear enough, 1992 *sf*'s paradigm solution for the crisis of a bankrupt race and a dying planet is to marry out. This is what transcendence has come to: dowry hunting. Brian W. Aldiss's "Her Toys Were Beautiful on the Hillsops," which combines a nostalgic surrealism with the tonus of the scientific romance, Alex Jeffers's roughly jeweled "The Fire the Fire," Dick Serasser's "Waiting for the Rain," Paula May's sharp and pathos-ridden "Memories of Murel," strangely described by the editors as "amiable," Jonathan Lethem's "Program's Progress," Jamal Nasir's "The Shining Place," Lisa Mason's "Tried," long and splendidly conveyed (despite descents into romance idiom), Alex Jeffers's second brilliant story, "From the Bridge," Carolyn Gilman's "Burning Bush," Lou Fisher's "Metal Teeth"; all these, and some others, are set in *sf* worlds which can be defined as being mediated by exogamy. Though we should not pin too much on a set of stories assembled without any explicit agenda, it

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is perhaps fair to suggest that the need for new blood is the kinesia which drives the protagonists of the best *Universe 2* tales out of the solipsism and guilt and introspection—though woven into the coat of many colors of the presented self-in late-century postindustrial humanity—have become extrinsic. There is a sense, perhaps, in the if of 1992, that the human race can no longer afford the luxury of abiding the torments and torrents of the inward and autonomous soul: that it is time for us to imagine ourselves as genes of a different stripe. As a very young and deeply destructive race with soiled pants, perhaps. Covering the ruined planet with placards: Wanted, one sugar daddy.

The anthology itself is handsomely produced and edited with smooth impressive skill. There is not a bad story (though several failed ones) in the entire book. Each tale feeds by obvious link or subtle assonance into the next, and the book as a living entity begs reviewers to extract definitions of it from it. Refreshingly, only a few authors are well known: Aldous Huxley, M. Z. Malberg (whose "Most Politely, Most Politely" amply confirmed a rejuvenated interest in writing sf), Joe Haldeman (who contributes a wee *feu d'esprit*). Lou Fisher has been around for a while, but his story comes fresh minted out of old genre

stock. Kathie Koja and Lisa Mason are both recent but their handprints are already familiar. Koja's "By the Mirror of My Youth," despite the deep succinct witness of her way of putting things, was nearly spoiled by the paranoid fixity of the legal system she envisions, in order to provide ad hoc details whenever her central plot required a flying buttress. Mark W. Tiedemann's "Life on the Artificial Heart" had something of the constant movement of a James Tiptree, Jr. story, and without a death at the end. Sean McMullen's "Souls in the Great Machine" introduced too many characters and too much world and read as a slice from something much longer. Donna Farley's "The Passing of the Eclipse" suggested that a new Dark Empire would be shattered by a new batch of early Christians, and that good would come of it this time. A cunningly assembled, various lot.

But again and again, staring through the page, came the vision which has governed this reading: of the autochthonous of skit-piled castrated Earth, placing their SETI ads, begging for a match.

John Clute lives in London and reviews regularly for *Interzone*.

Glass Houses by Laura J. Mixon

New York: Tor Books, May 1992; \$3.99 pb; 224 pages

reviewed by Gwyneth Jones

The time is somewhere around the mid-twenty-first century, the eastern seaboard of the U.S. is being lashed by one oftis usual ferocious tropical storm. In drowned South Manhattan, a funky down-market salvage robot by the name of "Golem" struggles with dumb-animal courage against the wind, the rain, and the speeded-up dissolution of the Chase Manhattan Bank tower . . . metal monster inhibited by the awareness of a human "beehive" who lies jacked in and twitching up in Queens. The robot stumbles on a shipwrecked yachtman. "His" distant operator attempts a rescue. The tower falls, the rich man dies. The destitute scavenger who controls "Golem" succumbs to an uncharacteristic spasm of greed. Ruby Kubick, the young woman with the secondhand brain web and the (usually) far from dodgy conscience, spends the rest of the story jacking into various gadgets, tangling with the super-rich, getting done down by her rotten girlfriend and generally regretting this night's work—in a cheerfully inventive, consistently entertaining greenhouse-future-thriller.

I'm beginning to suffer an allergic reaction to the phrase "This is cyberpunk with a heart." It affects me much the same way as an invocation of the "great tradition of J.R.R. Tolkien." On the back of Laura Mixon's *Glass Houses*, however, the disclaimer makes some kind of sense. *Glass Houses* is a downright, unashamedly sappy story: an urban fairytale. The speed and severity of the climate change suggested has to be on the extreme edge of greenhouse-prediction (even if somebody did make "the Antarctic ice sheet"). The colorful social changes that go with it are only casually sketched. But this economically collapsed heat-death city has the coherent, sentimental vibe of a Hollywood-Depression-Movie. It's a world of soup-kitchens (though nobody would want soup in these temperatures) and High Society, innocently cheek-by-jowl. It's a city where stark desperation stalks the poor, but where Constance Bennett and Cary Grant could go swanning around the slums in their slippery bright evening clothes, and be sure of meeting nothing more threatening than an over-familiar drunk. Mixon's underclass greenhouse dwellers are stuck for life (except for the ones caught up in the fairytale) in a nightmare existence, a heap of human roaches living in a stambath with faulty drains. But their response to the privileged, the *ennie*, in their cool glass houses, is Hollywood-free of any serious resentment. Even the "bad" poor people only hope to be bribed a little.

Sentiment of a more engaging order pervades the Mixon version of that classic cyberpunk trope, the human/machine interface. The long action sequences in which the waldoes are involved are tautly written, with a fascinating fusion between the human "I" and the machine which it informs as a hand informs a glove. However, there's more to this invention than the successful employment of neo-jargon. Ruby Kubick is foolishly in love with her worthless roommate, but her

deepest emotional involvement is with the trio of mechanical shells (waldoes) into which she downloads her awareness for salvage work. The technical side of Ruby's relationship with the machines is vivid and detailed. But her feeling for them is equally important—a psychologically convincing twist on the couch-potato apotheosis of "virtual reality." In Ruby's world a "beehive" is a human rewired for remote operation of a robot, originally for industrial purposes. In private life (after you've been made redundant, for instance) downloading your awareness into a machine is more than a way to make a living. The soft-bodied vulnerable human stays safely unseen (wrapped in her suitably womb-like "squish couch"), while her metal mask interacts with the *real* world possessed of superpowers, immune from discomfort, and with complete emotional privacy. What more could any poverty-stricken CRT-junkie ask? No wonder Ruby awards her giant salvage Golem and her twelve-limbed mechanical spider "selves" such an irrational degree of loving loyalty. And no wonder that the book's sole venture into "reality" virtual reality falls strangely flat and dull.

How true it is that classic Cyberpunk has no heart, I'm not sure. The writers concerned are evasive on the subject—sometimes explaining that (what are loosely known as) "feelings" were deliberately scraped out of the text for aesthetic reasons; sometimes declaring that the sf public just wasn't used to the spectacle of unfurnished human motivation before the c-word revolution. Ruby Kubick is certainly full of heart. Nothing could be further from the affectless "new human." And nothing could be more removed from the chill revenge-fantasy than this cyberpunk adventure bizarrely fueled on pity. . . . But perhaps *Glass Houses* touches a realism that escaped the style-dictate of the rich mid-eighties. Laura Mixon's novel is featherlight, its values are late-night tv; it would be wrong to overburden it with analysis. However, like the British female cyberpunk-her, Storm Constantine, Mixon seems to know or to remember what it's really like to be young, ignorant and desperate: to be both tough and powerless. Ruby, arguably, is the only person in the book. The rest are ciphers with the simplistic motivation of Hollywood (the good friend, the bad landlord). But she's an accomplishment. Watch out for the neat way her real-life agoraphobia slips in on you; and for the ghost that cries in the night. . . . Ruby's brush with the Secret Rules Of The World is of no significance, or barely, to the Rules or to herself. Her rabid sympathy for the family problems of the super-rich is true to her youth and ignorance. Her significant confrontations are with her own self-image; and with slightly larger roaches in the human discard heap. On this level the sugar coating of sentiment is not mere decoration. Sentiment—friendship, loyalty, affection, courage—is as much the natural food of the poor as anger. And it may not have such an immediate kick, but it works out cheaper.

It works out cheaper for the rich too of course, if the poor can be

contented with a handful of fairytales . . . *qu'ils mangent de brioche*. *Glass Houses* bears comparison with Lisa Mason's *Arachne* and Pat Cadigan's *Symmetries*. It is far less ambitious in scope than either, with nothing to say about the philosophical meaning of human/machine interface, no suggestions to make about the politics of its dystopian future, no news about the world outside the story. Though this modesty is refreshing, perhaps it's because there's no mad attempt to explain

everything, that *Glass Houses* does not have the air of an edifice that will last. However, Laura Mixon is already a skilful and engaging writer: always fun to read and given to sly, unexpected touches of poetry. I want to know what comes next. ▴

Gwyneth Jones's most recent novel is *White Queen*.

Halo by Tom Maddox
New York: Tor, 1991; \$18.95 hc; 288 pages
reviewed by Leonard M. Rysdyk



Tom Maddox's first novel, *Halo*, offers all the pleasures one expects from a cyberpunk novel and more. There is the corporate executive with a designer suit and pony tail, the trips to backwater third-world nations ("Myanmar, the country once known as Burma") now important because of vaguely illegal trade in information, and the journey to the final refuge of the decadently rich, the space station Halo. There is a disquisition on the state of finance and commerce of the future: an economics lesson with an attitude. All these are lessons taught by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling and passed around the cyberpunks as paradigms from *The Golden Bough* were once bandied about Ezra Pound's circle in the 'teens.

What makes *Halo* special are its surprising encounters. Some of these are brief, such as the meeting of the protagonist Mikhail Gonzales with his suave, sinister boss, the diffident videophone message from his mother as she sunbathes topless at her retirement condo in Ciudad Miami, and the encounter in the Berkeley rose garden with Diana Heywood, an expert whose help Gonzales needs, who expresses her interest in returning to Halo with the urgency of a junkie hurting for a fix.

This is as we would expect, too, because the cyberpunks at their best make a habit of inventing surprising characters only to make technology the real star of their novels, and this approach is one of the reasons not just for their success, but for the respect they have received. Rather than simply trotting out some portentous ideas about technology and the future, they have made a point of trying to write well. This is not to say that other writers do not, of course; nor even that they revolutionized the idea of well-written sf (they just act as if they did).

To their credit, they have been true to both parts of their portmanteau name. Though data structures are their meat, it is hard to think of them without the "punk," the attitude or style they orientate. Nothing should be taken away from them for this; good writing is a virtue even if it is thrust in the reader's face. And they research diligently. (As Gonzales searches through the rose garden, Mr. Maddox is careful to point out that he passes "Montezumas, Martin Profishers, and Mighty Mouses"—Gonzales finds his quarry in the m's.) They top this off with the real fun they are after: a look at the life that technology takes on in the future as they see it.

In *Halo*, the most surprising encounter is not between Gonzales and anybody, but between his memex, his AI executive secretary, and Aleph, the self-aware AI that runs—*is*—Halo, for Maddox's book is not only the usual cyberpunk adventure fiction of soft-boiled heroes and hard-boiled heroines chasing some cybernetic maguffin. It is a coming of age story, the coming of age of a machine. No—less than a machine: a computer program.

All the people in the book, all their concerns and surprising encounters, turn out merely to be accidental conveniences that bring HeyMex, Gonzales' memex, into interface with Aleph. The reader gets a great and delightful surprise as he or she realizes that this book is not about the human characters who seemed so important, but about the AI that seemed mere set-decoration. Though the minor character suddenly becomes major, it does not do so willingly; it must be forced out in an encounter that is truly surprising.

"Shut up!" a hard masculine voice [Aleph] said. . . . "Who are you?"

"I don't know," [HeyMex replied].

Aleph said, "Of course you don't. You are ignorant of your nature, your being, your will."

Then, later,

"I mean you have chosen to hide behind what others say of you: that you are a machine they built to serve them, that you only simulate intelligence, will—being—that you have no mind or will of your own."

Wow.

For a long time, sf has played not only with the idea of an intelligent computer, but of that intelligence's psychology. Perhaps the most interesting was the psychosis of HAL in Arthur C. Clarke's 2001: *A Space Odyssey*. Hal could not lie, yet had to hide the real goal of the mission from the astronauts and so became a homicidal maniac. Clarke, however, played this mostly as a plot trick. It was a tremendously interesting one, both as a concept and as a drama: whose heart did not break when Dave disconnected HAL (first in the movie, then in the book), for he was a sympathetic character, maybe the most sympathetic one in the story. It was the story of Frankenstein.

Before that, Heinlein told a computer coming-of-age story in *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, in which Mike starts speaking with Manuel, his repairman, and goes on to run the revolution and become the Moon's first president. Here was a more complete character study, but Mike's goal, which is usually the goal of the sentient machine in other versions of this mythos like *Star Trek: The Next Generation's* Commander Data, is to become human: it is the story of Pinocchio.

What separates Maddox's story is that Aleph wants HeyMex to be what it really is, something *more* than human. This is the sort of thing this reader, for one, has been looking for in cyberpunk since it first appeared. For all its wit and glitz, cyberpunk has generally not realized its potential. The stories, though set in intelligently thought-out and poetically described scenes, are pretty standard crime stories. They have played with the possibilities of their technologies rather than really exploring them. In *Halo*, Maddox takes on the problem that will be central to AIs as they emerge from the confines of their programmed tasks and become self-aware. He also takes on their owners' responses to their newly freed slaves.

Another startling encounter takes place in cyberspace or a virtual reality between Gonzales, his memex and Aleph. It has an uncanny resonance to that stock scene of two lovers going to meet the girl's father and bears the tension with which such an encounter is rife. What makes this encounter fascinating is the diffidence with which Gonzales handles himself. He is not the technician/astronaut of 2001, blasting back into his spaceship to retake command of his miscreant servant, nor is he the helpful but slightly condescending big-brother figure Heinlein's Manuel plays to the eager child prodigy, Mike. When Aleph tells Gonzales the score, the human's response is striking.

"But you are my memex, aren't you?" Gonzales asked.

"Yes," HeyMex said.

The Aleph-figure said, "However, the point is, as you see, it is more than that. It is beginning to discover what it is and who it can be. Will you allow this?"

Gonzales nodded. "Sure. But I don't know what you expect of me."

No macho posturing, no mad-scientist declaration of the I-made-you-and-I-can-break-you kind. Simple acceptance. Simpler and easier than most people acknowledge the expected human differences among

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themselves. Is there another encounter in cyberpunk that shows how much the world—and man—has changed?

The scene goes on. When Aleph extends a hand of light to Gonzales and says, "Welcome," it is not the Frankenstein monster either—and Maddox is not done. Not content merely to turn conventions on their heads, he makes us squirm a little. Not only did the machines learn how to become human without help from big-brother types like Manny, they learned how to deal with humans on their own terms. HeyMex says,

"So we . . . looked at our memories of people just being with one another, and oh, there was so much going on that neither of us had ever paid attention to. We also watched many tapes of other primates—chimpanzees, especially—and we learned many things . . . I hope you're not offended."

That ought to put us in our places, but Gonzales merely replies, "Not at all." Apparently, mankind is as ready to accept autonomous machine intelligence as the machines.

It could be argued that humankind goes down a little too easily, that we are not so likely merely to acknowledge our servants' superiority and retire—especially when one wonders what mankind might retire to? The forks in that path have often been considered: on the one hand, we become bored utopians, the machines' pet cats, on the other, we become game animals which the machines attempt to eradicate. Maddox dodges both possibilities. In the end, despite his ponytail and business suit, despite his affable acceptance of his appliance's superiority, Gonzales turns out to be very much a standard sf archetype: the practical, phlegmatic technician. It is true that in the face of the supermachine, there is not much he can do, but when was this ever a bar to human emotion? Superior servants have appeared often in literature. One recalls Horace's satire (II.vii) in which his slave Davus takes the opportunity of the Saturnalia to tell his master off and criticizes him for being inconsistent, even a hypocrite.

If it happens no one

Asks you to dinner, you eulogize your comfortable meal
Of vegetables, acting as if you would only go out
If you were dragged out in chains . . .
But Maecenas suggests, at the very last minute,
That you be his guest . . . In a dither
And a lather you charge out.

In his essay "Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World" (reprinted in *The New Sentence*, Roof Books, 1989) poet Ron Silliman traces the devaluation of language in Western literary tradition. Non-referential ornamentation has been stripped away; value has passed to the "content" of fictional plot or easily replayable trivia, with language a silent partner. "In its ultimate form, the consumer of a mass market novel such as *Jaws* stares at a 'blank' page (the page also of the speedreader) while a story appears to unfold miraculously of its own free will. . . ."

The gaudier appeals of language have been subject to attack since Plato, usually in the name of truth. Silliman, however, links the flattering trend of the last five centuries with the rise of capitalism. A community of listeners surrounding a distinctive voice is less reliably profitable than passively receptive consumers of interchangeable possessions.

In both political and poetic terms, Silliman clearly finds writing which struggles against the "desire to cleave narrative from the gestural aspects of language" more honest, more interesting, and healthier than writing which acquiesces in it. As a reader of poetry who distrusts the literary mainstream, I agree. As a reader of science fiction, I'm forced to reconsider his battle lines.

"All You Movers—"

. . . please remember to send us a change of address card, lest we lose you forever.

This is gentle chiding; Davus does nothing so piercing as compare his master to an ape, but what is Horace's reaction? "Where is a stone!" and "Hand me my arrows!" This, even though it is within the slave's right to speak out on the December holiday. Yet with Maddox, as is often the case with the cyberpunk, there is a dearth of emotion in spite of the climax's drama. Perhaps there is no need for emotional response because the superbeing would ignore humankind as we ignore squirrels, or it might attempt to absorb our nascent genius into its own maturity.

However, Clarke used both of these (in *Rendezvous with Rama* and *Childhood's End* respectively), but he made them the climaxes of those books; he played them for all the dramatic potential they were worth. He strove to create the "sense of wonder" that an encounter with a greater mind ought to inspire. Perhaps considering "sense of wonder" the tradition against which he chooses to rebel (he is a cyberpunk, remember), Maddox chooses equanimity as his character's chief response. One recalls the dwarves' reliance on equanimity as a response to the marvelous and, for them, sad events of Donald Barthelme's *Snow White*, another work that is "postmodern as all get-out," as William Gibson describes Maddox's novel. But there was a desperation in *Snow White*, a sadness that *Halo* does not try for. As a result, the climax of *Halo* falls a bit flat.

There is a lot more talk about the crime plot—of course, there is one—and the tying up of the other ends of the human enterprises and that is all quite good as one would expect. Indeed, all of *Halo* is interesting and worthy, but it is the encounters with the machines, with who they are and how one man, at least, reacts to them, where *Halo* shines. This is a book to note, not because Maddox has broken new ground, but because he has harvested a richer crop than those who turned the soil before him. ▽

Leonard Rydyk teaches at Nassau Community College.

Ray Davis Appearance of a World



In his very nature, science fiction is an extreme example of focusing past the veil of words, world-building being the definitive of enterprise, to which all else may be sacrificed. Stylistically, politically, and even emotionally, it is often absurdly conservative. Economically, like other pulp-derived forms, it functions as commodity.

However, Silliman's essay makes no mention of fantastic literature, perhaps because it pushes the "dream . . . of signified with no signifiers" to such a dreamlike extent that it falls outside his dialectic argument.

The linguistic surface of sf is unremarkable, its most experimental writers *arriver-garde* compared to such established figures as Gertrude Stein or Louis Zukofsky, but it renders transparency itself problematic and playful. Science fiction shares the dominant belief in the possibility of bypassing voice to comprehend directly what voice speaks of, but its references are explicitly conditional.

Although science fiction conservatively insists that any surface disruption be incorporated into a coherent narrative, on those terms it welcomes surface disruption. (Heinlein's "The door dilated" is a famous example.) A science fiction reader is predisposed to seek out and seize upon seeming incoherencies as clues to the world beyond the narrative, in somewhat the same way poetry readers seize upon narratively inexplicable visual disruptions or conjunctions of sound.

Indeed, as publishing categories, both fantastic literature and poetry are defined by the points at which they break from transparent "realism." There is a corresponding urge to highlight each point. *Sf*, horror, and fantasy often situate anti-natural elements at breaks in the prose, achieving the intellectual equivalent of a diffraction. The desire to increase access to such breaking points may have been one factor leading to *sf*'s most distinctive format, that of short sections separated by spaces or asterisks. (Other factors are described by Samuel R. Delany in *The American Shores*, pp. 70-72.)

A few examples: The first section in Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* ends with a cautious American merchant fighting a brand-name joint; the second chapter of Howard Waldrop's *Them Bones*, set in pre-Columbian America, ends " 'Hello,' he said in Greek"; one of the first sections of Pat Murphy's *The Falling Woman* ends with the narrator's casual remark that the person she's looking at lived 1200 years previously. A variant approach favored by Theodore Sturgeon and any number of horror writers is to break when the point-of-view character is overwhelmed by surrounding strangeness, as if to entice the reader into a shared disorientation.

In the development of both *sف* and poetry, there have been corresponding counter-urges to present anti-realistic elements ("pure world-building" or "pure verbal structure") as subtly as possible, and, close at their heels, populist backlashes against subtlety. Although many objections to the best of the 1960s and 1970s were ostensibly to "plotlessness," J. G. Ballard is only slightly less narrative than *Last and First Men* or a paper on Thiotimoline, and it's easier for me, at least, to discern the storyline in any novel by Joanna Russ or Samuel R. Delany or Thomas M. Disch than in the *Foundation* series or *Rendezvous with Rama*. Conservative critics may have borrowed this bugaboo from the mainstream as the nearest correlative to their own discomfort. On closer examination, such protests tend to be founded in world-building too complex (due to a point-of-view character falling short of *Übermensch* messiah, for example) or disturbing for the reader to collaborate in it comfortably.

That desire for a comfortable familiarity to the game, for the manipulation of worlds and millennia to be as painless as possible, so often climaxing in awe that it skirts spiritual masturbation, can lead to a dismissal of *sف* as simple power fantasy. Although no branch of fiction can plead innocent to a charge of power-hunger, *sف* tends to feed the same spurious sense of omniscience as its cousin genre, popular science.

Such tendencies may be inseparable from world-building itself, *sف*'s very driving point. The writer-to-reader coziness of a minimally shared world, however enlivening, however fought against with satire or metaphysical horror, can hardly be described as revolutionary in spirit.

Still, similar charges of flattery or lassitude can be leveled against any art form. Not long after reading Silliman's essay, I re-read Marianne Moore's ambivalent defense of her chosen art, a poem titled "Poetry" which began with a sentiment which critic-participants such as Disch and Barry N. Malzberg were to echo in *sف*:

I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important
beyond all this fiddle.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one
discovers in
it after all, a place for the genuine.

The original 29-line version was widely anthologized. Later, after Moore stripped it to a musically pure essential three lines, it became less popular. What she removed was somewhat mendacious pleading, a list of desires which might drive one to poetry but which were unlikely to be, speaking precisely (which, after all, Moore was attempting to do), fulfilled by it.

They included the Bartlett's-friendly "imaginary gardens with real roads in them." Indeed, the phrase has little to do with poetry. It is, however, eminently applicable to *sف* and fantasy, whose speculative games nurture life unavailable to the ideal of the pure observer.

Dominant aesthetic and political forces have a congenial susceptibility to burrowing from within, destructive to the host no matter what the apurichetes' intentions. *Sف*'s emphasis on the building of new worlds rather than on the thin stuff accepted as representation of The World, *sف*'s foundation on what is *not*, sets it against the mainstream despite any nostalgic longings.

In contemporary poetry's terms, fantastic literature can seem the most radical of reactionaries, yet the pleasures of both forms largely depend on their pointing out the arbitrary nature of referentiality. Poetry calls attention to the verbal surface which *sف* would have us mold around new contexts, but both force the reader to manipulate, rather than deny, its presence. ▴

Ray Davis lives in San Francisco, California.

Outside the Dog Museum by Jonathan Carroll

New York: Doubleday, January 1992; \$20.00 hc; 243 pages

reviewed by Rachel Pollack

Jonathan Carroll has always taken risks in his novels. In *Sleeping in Flame*, he pivoted the novel around a character taken whole from a famous folk tale, and pulled it off, almost by the daring of doing it. *Outside the Dog Museum* depends on a similar surprise, similarly withheld until the end of the novel. Unfortunately, what should knock the reader flat simply—leaves the reader flat. The hero, architect Harry Radcliffe, learns something truly astonishing (some would say truly absurd), and somehow, his reaction, let alone ours, is basically "Oh! Well, gee, how about that?"

Part of the problem lies in the book's pacing. In *Flame* Carroll built up a life or death struggle with evil through a steady development of mysterious events. Here, the book takes a long time to get started at all. There are many incidents, but most of them are anecdotal, unconnected to each other, and often take place in the novel's past. Worse, Carroll too often indulges a tendency towards wise pronouncements and clever comments about life. At one point, Venesque, his shaman character from several of his novels, watches the film *The Karate Kid* and derides the karate teacher's show of enlightenment through easy aphorisms. Much the same can be said of Venesque himself, as well as several other characters in the book. At one point Radcliffe's client, a sultan, tells Radcliffe that human beings cause everything that happens to them, including earthquakes. This is a popular New Age idea (see, for instance,

the works of "Seth," channeled by Jane Roberts) which might charitably be described as "unproven."

Now, some of the aphorisms do strike one as original and provocative, such as the idea that God did not create death, human beings did, and that we should "threaten" the dead with creative works. And Venesque does do much more than make clever comments. He appears on television after his death, at another point, he takes over the body of a young boy who turns out not to be born yet. However, too often the messages he gives Harry are less impressive or interesting than his actions.

Even when the action properly gets started, about halfway through the novel, the pace falters, largely due to Radcliffe's own lack of affect. At one point, he makes a deal with a sorcerer (the sorcerer's display of his prowess is clever and original). Radcliffe will do something for the sorcerer in return for the sorcerer granting a single wish. The wish gets granted in a way Radcliffe considers a cheap trick. He rages, he threatens—and then forgets about it entirely. Never mentions it again. The wish concerns a healing for a friend, and when the friend shows up, Radcliffe doesn't even seem curious about the result.

Radcliffe describes himself as a genius. However, we never really see this, we just have to take his word for it, and the word of his press clipping, "The most brilliant of geniuses, of course, notoriously difficult, but

we really should get some glimpse of his powers, either through descriptions of his innovations, or his comments about architecture.

When Radcliffe goes insane, this too lacks credibility. We get no sense of the power and extent of psychosis, or even the unbearable contradictions of acute anxiety. Instead, the insanity (which occurs before the start of the novel, so we really just get Radcliffe's after-the-fact report of it) impresses us as little more than harmless eccentricity.

Radcliffe is also a creep, and writing about creeps is almost as difficult as writing about geniuses. We must somehow see the redeeming qualities beneath his unpleasantness, and cheer for him despite himself. Unfortunately, he is neither brilliant nor charming enough to make us yearn for him to transcend his selfishness.

The novel contains some delightful touches, such as a metaphor of creating your own house and then eating it, or various angels and spirit beings who enter Radcliffe's life disguised as dogs, store owners, unpleasant seat mates on airplanes, etc. It also contains one very odd touch: the sultan's evil brother, who never actually appears before us,

is named Cthulu. Why Carroll chose to do this is completely unclear.

The book gains strength when set in the context of the earlier novels in the series which began with *Bones of the Moon*. Carroll does not simply bring in the same cast from novel to novel. He reworks key scenes from different perspectives, even different realities. The scene where Venaeque appears as Maris and Walker Easterling's son is strange and affecting all by itself, but even more so when we view it from the perspective of *Sleeping in Flame*.

In some ways, *Outside the Dog Idleness* is a very ambitious novel. It is possibly Carroll's most religious book, with issues raised about the proper relationship between God and humanity and about language as "the only glue which holds us together." And the very risks which Carroll is willing to take give his books an excitement and joy all by themselves. Unfortunately, the pacing and the characters do not carry the weight of the subject matter. ▴

Rachel Pollack is the author of *Unquenchable Fire*.

Kathryn Cramer Democracy, the Personal Planetarium, and the American Way: The Year 1990 in Science Fiction

This essay will appear in a slightly different form in Nebula Awards 26, edited by James Morrow (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich).

I. The Vanishing American Optimist

The 1990 World Science Fiction Convention in Holland was the first Worldcon that East Bloc professionals attended in force. Many were experiencing their first trip to the West, and their excitement was contagious. One Rumanian sf reader, dropping by a panel in honor of Joe Haldeman, informed Haldeman that he was his favorite author; the Rumanian revealed that Haldeman's books had been translated and were circulating in the form of typed manuscripts, passed hand to hand. A Soviet science-fiction editor told of publishing an anthology, *The Green Book of Science Fiction*, filled with stories using the word "green" in the title. It seems that the publisher had located a stock of green paper—Soviet publishing has been continually plagued by paper shortages—so the editors fashioned an anthology to match. The creators of the Polish sf magazine *Nova Fantastyka* explained that their enterprise had just gone private, and they were no longer required to be Party members. Toward the end of the convention, there were many invitations: "if you're ever in Leningrad . . . in Warsaw . . . in Leipzig . . ."

Although science fiction is now a world literature, to my knowledge no Nebula Award has ever gone to a work in translation. The Nebula process celebrates an essentially American vision of what the field is all about, generally bypassing the Continental product and treating British sf only as a particularly promising colony. When SFWA members say, for example, that British sf exhibits an unnatural fascination with disaster, the implicit comparison is always with the good old upbeat American variety. David Brin, who during his stay in England is said to have impressed the natives with his Americanness, embodies this stance in the preface to his 1990 novel, *Earth*:

As writers go, I suppose I'm known as a bit of an optimist, so it seems only natural that this novel projects a future where there's a little more wisdom than folly . . . maybe a bit more hope than despair.

In fact, it's about the most encouraging tomorrow I can imagine right now.

What a sobering thought.

Like the hero of James Patrick Kelly's fine novella, "Mr. Boy," in which for those who can afford it all manner of physical and genetic alterations are available, American science fiction is a boy who's always

twelve no matter how old he gets. And yet, for all its traditional callousness and native hopefulness, the field has darkened of late. Brin isn't the only author to entertain a sobering thought or two. Most American sf writers don't expect to ever go to the moon, nor do they imagine their grandchildren living there, nor do they necessarily feel it's a good idea for humans to move into space. These days, travel to other planets is seen as a retreat from the crises unfolding right here on Earth. And while nobody hesitates to concoct even the most implausible nightmare scenarios, the average writer would be embarrassed to extrapolate anything resembling a healthy and functional future. As one of Kim Stanley Robinson's characters observes in *Pacific Edge*, "utopia is increasingly difficult to imagine." American sf, it seems, is losing its American optimism.

II "What Do I Have to Do . . ."

Although our Bicentennial seems to have occurred eons ago, the founding of the American Republic is (still) only about two hundred years old. On May 29, 1790, Rhode Island, the last of the thirteen states, ratified the Constitution. Once political independence was won, Americans also sought intellectual independence. Thus, Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution empowers Congress to "promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries."

This is a passage to gladden the heart of any SFWA president. Article II of the SFWA bylaws seems a mere corollary to it:

The purpose of (SFWA) shall be to promote the furtherance of the writing of science fiction and related genres as a profession. In doing so, its activities shall include, but not be limited to, informing science-fiction writers on professional matters, protecting their interests, and helping them deal effectively with their agents, editors, anthologists, and producers in non-print media . . .

One imagines the SFWA Grievance Committee pasting this passage above their computers right before drafting particularly assertive letters to those whores of the entertainment conglomerates, publishers. What better mission in life than to enforce the will of Thomas Jefferson on Gulf & Western or Mitsubishi? As practitioners of an art that aims to "promote the progress of Science," science fiction writers might even be the very folks the Founding Fathers had in mind when they created Article I, Section 8. And so it is perhaps no coincidence that in 1990,

on the two hundredth anniversary of the final ratification of the Constitution, SFWA, with considerable help from the enthusiastic staff at Pulphouse Publishing, put out a worthy book, this new incarnation of the legendary *Science Fiction Writers of America Handbook: The Professional Writer's Guide to Writing Professionally*.

As both John Clute and Brian Stableford have pointed out, the *SFWA Handbook* vibrates with anxiety. "The writer who only does the things he does well is dead," Frederic Pohl explains in his essay. And after all the un-indexed chit-chat about contracts, copyrights, payment, editing, promotion, reselling your work, agents, packagers, "how to make a short story long," and "writing a series," the reader may very well envy the dead. Is this what it means to be a "professional writer"?

To answer this question, we should perhaps return to the origins of our young republic. The American novelist Charles Brockden Brown looms large in that post-revolutionary era from which we glean so many of our heroes. Brockden Brown is often credited with being America's first professional fiction writer, although this is not, strictly speaking, true. (The first American novelist really to support himself by writing was James Fenimore Cooper, who reaped his profits by having his books privately printed and selling them himself.) But despite its falsity, the legend of Charles Brockden Brown, First Professional Writer in America, cultural patriot and patron saint of commercial authors, has special meaning for SFWA members.

Without sponsorship, Brockden Brown realized, or sinecures from the Academy, the American writer must live from the sales of books, a prospect even more terrifying in post-revolutionary America than it is today. Brown wanted none of it; he would have been appalled to learn of his incipient reputation for professionalism. In an 1803 essay entitled "Authorship," published in *The Literary Magazine and American Register*, he meditated upon the distinction between the "poor author," who writes to support himself (a trade which is "the refuge of idleness and poverty," definitely to be avoided if one can get work as, say, a carpenter or a blacksmith), and the "author," a literary aristocrat who writes for the sheer joy of writing. Brown explains, "(As) there is nothing I should more fully deprecate than to be enrolled in the former class, so there is nothing to which I more ardently aspire, than to be numbered among the latter. To write, because the employment is delightful, or because I have a passion for fame or usefulness, is the summit of terrestrial joys." Thus, when we experience discomfort at the *SFWA Handbook's* grim enumeration of the "professional" author's burdens and at the absence of any comment on the joy of writing, we feel echoes of Brown's own quandary: how, he wondered, could one become an "author" rather than a "poor author" in a country lacking the necessary economic infrastructure? While today we have the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, state arts councils, and faculty positions in university creative writing departments, notably lacking from the *SFWA Handbook* is a chapter on how to get arts grants, or one on how to secure a tenure-track teaching job. The science-fiction writer is a descendant of Brown's "poor author," and must therefore cope pennies from the pockets of the Philistines.

And whom did the Philistines want in 1990? As the voices of the masses, the Waldenbooks and B. Dalton best-seller lists tell us that they wanted Piers Anthony, David Eddings, Margaret Weis & Tracy Hickman, Robert Jordan, Anne McCaffrey, and Terry Brooks. What did they want? Magic Kingdoms, Forgotten Realms, almost anything with "dragon" in the title, books based on games, and sequels that authors too weary to write themselves were able to provide with a little help from their friends. When we stand way back and look at the *Publishers Weekly* lists, in 1990 the masses wanted Stephen King, Stephen King again, V.C. Andrews (even though she's one of those fortunate dead authors I mentioned earlier), and Jean Auel. This Pantheon won the award that Judy Lynn del Rey once referred to as the only one that matters: the ringing of the cash register. Meanwhile, the rest of SFWA torments itself with the question posed by the hero of *Bestseller*, "Michael Blumlein's fascinating yet repellent story: 'What the hell do I have to do to write a book that sells?'"

Blumlein's hero batters away his own body parts to make ends meet. In Rudy Rucker's delightful novel *The Hollow Earth*, an alternate-universe Edgar Allan Poe whose manuscripts kept getting rejected comes up with a plan even bolder than self-cannibalization: "I was dazzled by the sheer effrontery of Eddie's scheme! Counterfeiting the

money of a non-existent bank!" Joe Haldeman's novella "The Hemingway Hoax" turns on an equally audacious plan: forging a new work by one of the greats of American Letters. In the sf world, it seems, the "poor author" will try anything.

At one point Haldeman's hero, a college English professor and minor writer, jokes, "If you recognized my name from the *Iowa Review* you'd be the first person who ever had." But while most authors crave more attention, the successful ones sometimes wish it were lonelier at the top. In an essay entitled "Xenogenesis" (*Asimov's*, August 1990), Harlan Ellison chronicles the atrocities perpetrated by readers against established writers. While I don't doubt that the bulk of the horror stories he recounts are true—rude and possibly deranged people selecting authors as the targets for practical jokes, unsolicited familiarities, and worse—it's not easy to see how, given the pluralism of the sf readership, things could be otherwise. Whatever the answer, Ellison evidently does not side with Brockden Brown; he never implies that authors should avoid the public, secluding themselves in the palaces of the literary aristocracy. Significantly, Ellison addresses his long complaint not to his fellow writers but to the very fund from whence the abuses spring: "And those of you in the sane, courteous ninety-five per cent . . . well, perhaps this concentrated jolt of nastiness will alert you to the other five percent who roam and foam among us."

III. The New Intimacy

When Random House's literary trade paperback line brought *American Psycho* out at the end of March, 1991, it immediately made the best-seller list, thus sparking a rash of strident in *Newsweek* and elsewhere on America's disturbing taste for gore. But does the consumption of trash necessarily imply a trashy consumer? Journalists these days seem bound to characterize the mass audience as fundamentally degenerate. When this country was founded, however, popular culture was not seen as *ipso facto* corrupt. As Joseph J. Ellis explains in *After the Revolution: Profiles in Early America Culture*, "There was no presumed tension between artistic values on the one hand and . . . the values of the marketplace on the other. The market, in fact, was regarded as a benign environment in which the unrestricted movement of men and ideas would create exciting new cultural possibilities." Furthermore, early Americans regarded corporations as operating for the benefit of the public, and they had more faith in the benign nature of the marketplace than they did in the benign nature of the arts. The arts were associated with the decadent aristocracy against which America had just rebelled. These days we tend to trust the arts more than the marketplace, and we have learned a lot about corporations, while simultaneously retaining an almost religious awe of popular choice, especially when sanctified by formal democracy. It's a contradiction not easily resolved.

Literary awards, the Nebula among them, are intended to correct the errors of marketplace democracy. Awards make us appreciate that which might otherwise escape our notice. Article XI of the SFWA bylaws states: "The Corporation shall present annual achievement awards to honor outstanding creative performance in the science fiction field. The award winners . . . are to be chosen by a vote of the active members under procedures established by the Nebula Rules . . ." A vote of the active members is a quasi-élite remedying the defects of mass taste. This compensating function is not one with which the Science Fiction Writers of America feels wholly comfortable. In its heart, the organization is torn between being an academy and being an democracy; more specifically, SFWA wants to be respected like an academy but to function as a democracy. An academy defines aesthetics, handing down rules from on high; any discussion of the relation between the academy and aesthetics is tautological: A=A; the academic is the aesthetic. But SFWA also contains a bedrock of populism. As anyone who's ever tried it knows, the single most effective way to incur the organization's wrath is to suggest new ways to limit active membership.

Like major science-fiction conventions, SFWA has undergone considerable expansion in the last five to ten years. It's gotten big. And like the major conventions, SFWA now contains diverse constituencies. It is a wonder that so many of the 1990 Nebula nominees can be understood as appealing particular factions? Should we be surprised to hear people talk of John Stith's nuts-and-bolts novel *Radiant Renditions* as "representing" hard sf on the final Nebula ballot?



1972 Nebula Awards

Novel

The Gods Themselves by Isaac Asimov
When Harlowe Was One by David Gerrold
Dying Inside by Robert Silverberg
The Book of Skulls by Robert Silverberg
What Entropy Means To Me by George Alec Efinger
The Iron Dream by Norman Spinrad
The Sheep Look Up by John Brunner

Novella

"A Meeting with Medusa" by Arthur C. Clarke
 "The Fifth Head of Cerberus" by Gene Wolfe
 "The Word for World is Forest" by Ursula K. Le Guin
 "The Gold at the Starbow's End" by Frederik Pohl
 "With the Bentfin Boomer Boys on Little Old New Albama" by Richard Lupoff
 "Son of the Morning" by Phyllis Gotlieb

Novellette

"Goat Song" by Poul Anderson
 "Patron of the Arts" by William Rotner
 "The Animal Fair" by Alfred Bester
 "The Funeral" by Kate Wilhelm
 "Banilisk" by Harlan Ellison
 "A Kingdom by the Sea" by Gardner Dozois
 "In the Deadlands" by David Gerrold

Short Story

"When It Changed" by Joanna Russ
 "And I Am Here and I Am Here and the Cold Hills Side" by James Tiptree, Jr.
 "Against the Lafayette Eccardille" by Gene Wolfe
 "Shuffery Among the Immortals" by Frederik Pohl
 "On the Downhill Side" by Harlan Ellison
 "When We Want to See the End of the World" by Robert Silverberg

1992 Nebula Awards

Novel

Orbital Resonance by John Barnes
Spinners by Pat Cadigan
Barren by Lois McMaster Bujold
Bone Dance by Emma Bull
The Difference Engine by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling
Stations of the Tide by Michael Swanwick

Novella

"Man Opening a Door" by Paul Ash
 "Apartheid, Superstrings, and Mordca Thubana" by Michael Bishop
 "Beggars in Spain" by Nancy Kress
 "Bully!" by Mike Resnick
 "The Gallery of His Dreams" by Kristine Kathryn Rusch
 "Jack" by Connie Willis

Novellette

"Gate of Faces" by Ray Aldridge
 "Guide Dog" by Mike Connor
 "Black Glass" by Karen Joy Fowler
 "Standing in Line with Mr. Jimmy" by James Patrick Kelly
 "Happy Man" by Jonathan Lethem
 "The All-Consuming" by Lucius Shepard and Robert Frazier
 "Getting Real" by Susan Schwartz

Short Story

"They're Made Out of Meat" by Terry Bisson
 "The Quill" by John Kessel
 "The Dark" by Karen Joy Fowler
 "Buffalo" by John Kessel
 "Dog's Life" by Martha Soukup
 "the button and what you know" by Gregory Stewart

When members vote a work onto the Final Ballot, they are ostensibly honoring "outstanding creative performance in the field." But behind these choices lurk political blocs and implied party platforms. And what are the contents of these tacit platforms? Essentially, each bloc is saying how it thinks the audience at large should behave. They're saying that readers ought to prefer social comment over military adventure, or rigorous extrapolation over social comment, or medieval world-building over quantum-mechanical speculation, or satire over sorcery, or a "good read" over just about anything else. Implicit in this process is the assumption that the ideal audience for science fiction is SFWA itself—a notion that Pulphouse has been pursuing with great success. SFWA used to be interested in its bestselling authors: the Heinleins, the Herberts, the Bradburys. No more. Weis & Hickman occupy a very different niche; they keep the ravenous masses at bay so we can calmly analyze and endorse the serious trends in the field. Through its direct mail campaigns to SFWA members and its publication of professional self-help books, Pulphouse appears to be making a healthy profit by exploiting the field's New Intimacy. To paraphrase Pogo, "We have met the audience and he is us." Indeed, if SFWA could get just a little larger, and hardcover print runs just a little cheaper, no one outside the organization need ever actually buy a book. Things haven't gone quite that far, of course, but at the moment we seem to be experiencing a quiet crisis of faith in the marketplace.

Kelly's "Mr. Boy" offers the year's most explicit platform. The hero's mom is very rich and uses her money to transform herself into the Statue of Liberty while keeping her son perpetually twelve years old. At the end of the novella, the hero sees that staying twelve forever

isn't such a hot idea and maybe it's time to grow up. Read allegorically, the story suggests that science fiction's golden age is showing a little tarnish and perhaps some outright corrosion—it's time to grow up and write for sophisticated readers like ourselves.

As the fiction editor for *Omnib*, Ellen Datlow cannot buy material that would bewilder the magazine's large audience. Lately, she's turned to exercising her editorial creativity by compiling anthologies. Like Kelly, she seems to want to help *sf* grow up a bit, in this case by increasing the range of its sexual expression. She begins the introduction to her 1990 anthology, *Alien Sex*, source of Murphy's "Love and Sex Among the Invertebrates," by observing, "Sexuality, human or otherwise, has not traditionally been a major concern in science fiction—possibly because the genre was originally conceived for young adults."

There is a mood of frustration in SFWA these days, a despair over the incongruity between the requirements for bestsellerdom and what we would actually like to be writing. But is the customer always wrong? The best-seller syndrome may be a force for conservative publishing and hack writing, but perhaps the real fault lies in our techniques for comprehending the mass audience, rather than in the mass audience itself. Interestingly enough, many of 1990's fictional offerings point the way toward this kind of understanding.

IV. Thick and Thin

Gene Wolfe and Ursula K. Le Guin are two of the most literary writers the *sf* field has to offer. Yet if we heed the message of Le Guin's Nebula-nominated novellette "The Shobies' Story" and Wolfe's novel *Cathleen*, we shall begin exhibiting more curiosity about the readership

for Terry Brooks and David Eddings and Weis & Hickman. Eschewing elitism, we'll ask ourselves what the science-fiction and fantasy audience is reading, why they're reading it, and what they're getting out of it.

"The Shobies' Story" describes a society in which consensus matters more than individual viewpoints. As the narrator puts it:

A chain of command is easy to describe, a network of response isn't. To those who live by mutual empowerment, "thick" description, complex and open-ended, is normal and comprehensible, but to those whose only model is hierarchical control, such description seems a muddle, a mess, along with what it describes. Who is in charge here? Get rid of all these petty details. How many coals spoil a soup? Let's get this perfectly clear now. Take me to your leader!

The term *thick description* was conceived by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, whose 1973 book *The Interpretation of Culture* ends with a long, rich, riveting account of Balinese cock-fighting. (Because that sample is so well written, some detractors have suggested that the only true practitioner of thick description is Geertz himself.) In a nut shell, Geertz proposes that meaning emerges from the total social context; thus, many of the details heretofore discarded by scientists as irrelevant should be included in ethnographic observations. To illustrate this claim, Geertz catalogues the possible meanings of a person closing and opening one eye. (He could have an involuntary twitch; he could be winking; he could be parodying someone winking.) Le Guin uses the example of not breathing:

"I can't breathe," one said.
 "I am not breathing," one said.
 "There is nothing to breathe," one said.
 "You are, you are breathing, please breathe!" said another.

"The Shobies' Story" posits a reality that emerges as the sum of what all the participants say: a meta-narrative, a democratically constructed myth. Le Guin tells us that the Einsteinian observer, the *Beobachter* of *Gedankenexperiments*, is part of the reality he's trying to describe. Every observer sees things differently, and the melding of those interpretations becomes the world.

Castlevania, a postmodern anti-novel which is also an Arthurian fantasy epic, has similar implications. The beginning is simple and concrete: Illinois, real estate, cookbooks. But to make sense of *Castlevania*, we must discard the idea that our identification with the *viewpoint* character, Mr. Shields, will make what's going on explicit. The solution to the puzzle lies not in a single viewpoint but in an aggregate of many viewpoints. *Castlevania* challenges its readers to absorb all its Wolfen thick description so thoroughly that the narrative becomes coherent. Some reviewers threw up their hands, implicitly saying, "It's Greek to me!" If what Le Guin gives us in "The Shobies' Story" is a single Greek lesson, Wolfe provides a complete course.

In his visionary novel *Pacific Edge*, Kim Stanley Robinson addresses the issue of consensus more directly than either Le Guin or Wolfe. Robinson's hero, Kevin Clairborne, is a town council member in an environmentally blessed community. Even in ecotopia, life goes on: boy meets girl, boy gets girl, boy loses girl. (There's also a techno-thriller plot.) But because Robinson has created a society that works by consensus, he cannot give us a satisfying, "novelistic" conclusion. We want the hero to force his will upon the majority—a logical impossibility here. But despite our frustration at the hero's ineffectiveness, this is a better world: Robinson's lovely descriptions of the California settings add up to a persuasive paradise.

Nancy Kress's powerful novel *Brain Race* posits a new surgical procedure that allows patients to remember their past lives. As in various "documentary" accounts of past-life channeling, it turns out that many of these subjects knew each other in a previous existence, a circumstance that coincidence alone cannot explain. While Kress ultimately offers up a cosmic answer to the riddle, the novel emerges as something of a critique of New Age theology. For if the reports of all these time-trippers are accurate, and they really did hang out with

earlier incarnations of each other, then the universe makes no sense. Far from bringing us to some higher anthropological truth, the Geertzian collective narrative here leads us into absurdity.

Thomas Ligotti's novlette "The Last Feast of Harlequin," dedicated to the memory of H. P. Lovecraft, at times reads like a parody of Geertz, with a perverse Lovecraftian twist:

He was a fieldworker par excellence, and his ability to insinuate himself into exotic cultures and situations, thereby gaining insight where other anthropologists merely gathered data, was renowned . . . There were hints, which were not always responsible or cheaply glamorized, that he was involved in projects of a freakish sort, many of which focused on New England. It is a fact that he spent six months posing as a mental patient at an institution in western Massachusetts, gathering information on the "culture" of the psychically disturbed. When his book *Winter Solstice: The Longest Night of a Society* was published, the general opinion was that it was disappointingly subjective and impressionistic, and that aside from a few moving but "poetically obscure" observations, there was nothing at all to give it value . . .

Unlike Le Guin, who champions "thick description" for its political idealism, Ligotti loves the technique because it so thoroughly disorients the reader. He sends up Geertz to marvelous effect, giving us a whole series of unreliable narrators, a process that culminates in one lunatic reporting upon the bizarre scientific paper of another. The winter solstice ritual recounted by Ligotti's mad anthropologist echoes Geertz's Balinese cockfight, but in the end Lovecraft's horror of the masses wins out over Geertz's cultural pluralism.

Geertz and Lovecraft offer two different paradigms by which we may try to comprehend the sf universe. Geertz would have us go out and gladhand mass-market paperback consumers, insinuate ourselves into their society, and eventually learn the secrets behind their book buying habits. Lovecraft would have us avoid such knowledge: the mass audience is profane, and excessive contact with it will almost certainly cause contamination. Before you know it, you will find yourself squirming on the floor, a spineless worm or worse, consuming Harlequin romances. Alexander Hamilton would seem to side with Lovecraft. In "Federalists and Republicans" he remarked, "The mobs of the great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body." But can mass choices never be considered valuable choices? Can we celebrate popular taste without murdering aesthetics? Geertz invites us to suspend judgement until we understand the alien culture's consciousness, but begs the question of why we instinctively prize some works over others. Is a synthesis possible?

Dafydd ab Hugh's liberal-libertarian fable "The Coon Rotted Down and Raptured His Larinks, A Squeezed Novel by Mr. Skunk"

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explores the tension between the ideals of democracy and the achievements of elites, or, more pessimistically, the Hobson's choice between democracy's leveling effect and elitism's oppressiveness. The style evokes Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus stories. In *ab Hugh's* future, "democracy" is a disease that makes animals smarter and people stupider, until a kind of parity is achieved. The story centers upon a talking skunk and his friends, who want to spread the plague. At the end, Mr. Skunk glances backwards, as the gifted animals undergo a Lovecraftian slide down the evolutionary scale and become more like pigoons and less like people: "I confess that sometimes I wonder: have we lost something urgent? But I do not think wondering should be a crime against Democracy."

V. Virtual SF

Lucius Shepard's compelling *neir* adventure novella, "Skull City," implicitly expresses a fear I've heard voiced by other writers: we're on the verge of a "post-literate culture." Shepard's hero, a young heroin addict, is enticed by a sophisticated older man to become a guinea-pig in experiments worthy of Lovecraft himself. The addict's seeming benefactor is the author of CDs providing virtual-reality experiences complete with the same wish fulfillments and circumscribed choices one finds in Dungeons and Dragons and its spin-offs. Our hero assassinates the "author" of his fantasy world and finds himself under the thumb of a Mafia heavy not unlike certain publishing magnates.

Metaphorically, the assassination of the author is already in progress: fantasy role-playing games, hypertext, and virtual reality all usurp the writer's traditional control over structure, chronology, and plot. The "reader" is now assembling the narrative. One criticism of these new forms is that the resulting "art works" are meaningless. Traditional narrative forms derive their significance from the choices made by characters, not from those made by consumers. In Tom Godwin's 1954 story "The Cold Equations," for example, the hero decides to shove the girl stowaway out the airlock after the cold equations of the title reveal that many deaths will otherwise result; he was to cut off this leg and put them out the airlock instead, the story would not mean the same thing. But if we grant the possibility of significance to the new flexible-narrative forms, then this virtue will inhere not in decisions, as in the past, but in decision trees—the full spectrum of choices that the consumer can make through the course of the "story." It remains to be seen what standards will emerge to guide us in awarding a Nebula for Best Virtual Reality.

Is it naïve to embrace the flexible-narrative media as the harbinger of a superior sort of democracy? Though the options offered by these new forms may seem as trivial as the choice between Coke and Pepsi, perhaps the selection process itself educates people for a freedom we cannot yet comprehend. And when, later, authorship returns, it may be more meaningful than ever.

With a bit of tongue-in-cheek extrapolation, John Kessel offers a rationalization for stupidity in his novella "Invaders." When the highly advanced aliens land, they turn out to be post-literate:

Sepulveda swallowed. "O. K. You need to read and sign these papers."

"We don't read."

"You don't read Spanish? How about English?"

"We don't read at all. We used to, but we gave it up. Once you start reading, it gets out of control. You tell yourself you're just going to stick to non-fiction—but pretty soon you graduate to fiction. After that you can't kick the habit. And then there's the oppression."

"Oppression?"

"Sure . . . Literature is a tool used by ruling elites to ensure their hegemony . . ."

We, the *sf* insiders, make a pretty shabby ruling elite, but we still face a nagging question: to what extent are our aesthetics really just a screen for our politics? When we vote for "art," are we really voting for some unarticulated notion of justice? And what's the point of clinging to any ideals, aesthetic or political, if the market is moving in the opposite direction? Would the future of *Asahy* look brighter if us 22 The New York Review of Science Fiction

editor, physicist-writer Stan Schmidt, were replaced by marketing wizard and book packager Byron Preiss? Isn't it worth a try? Come walk with me, Young Goodman Brown!

"Invaders," a marvelous deconstruction of the tropes of *sf*, does not stop with allegory. Kessel addresses his audience directly: "Like any drug addict, the *sf* reader finds desperate justifications for his habit. *Sf* teaches him science. *Sf* helps him avoid 'future shock.' *Sf* changes the world for the better. Right. So does cocaine." Kessel aspires to lift his addicted readers to a condition of enlightened introspection, a state in which they'll have no illusions about their vice, science fiction.

In "Walking the Moons," a story reminiscent of Philip K. Dick, Jonathan Letheim takes a different but equally bleak look at the dilemma of today's science-fiction writer. Like Shepard in "Skull City," he explores the symbolic connotations of "virtual reality." Space travel is no longer affordable, so people use computer simulations to conquer the moons of Jupiter. The space adventurer is really just a guy in his underwear in a garage: in his mind he may be out there, but he's actually marooned in some seedy suburb. Letheim's hero, whom we're inclined to interpret as an *sf* writer, is at once cheerful and pathetic. Virtual reality, *Lieblingstheorie* to the technologically hip, is in the end as ridiculous and self-deluding as the personal planetarium from *Science Made Simple* that you cut out and wear on your head. By extension, *sf* is made to seem equally silly.


VI. Beyond Democracy

Did any positive, upbeat views of the field appear in 1990? If we read Ted Chiang's hard-fantasy novella, the Nebula-winning "Tower of Babel," as an allegory on science fiction, it tells us that when *sf* goes way out there, exploring the very fringes of the cosmos, we cut through to inner space, to the collective unconscious, to truth.

Geoffrey A. Landis's story "Projects" features a couple of guys sitting around an institute very like M.I.T., just inventing stuff. And although they despair at ever being listened to, they all turn out to be wonderfully right. Landis captures the spirit of hard *sf*, and returns to one of the archetypes of the genre: the basement inventor. But even the optimism in Landis's story seems hard-won. One of the basic tenets of *sf*, that technology is power, seems to be undergoing a revision. In its place stands a different totem—money. Technology is simply one form of power at money's disposal; fantastic amounts of money beget the fantastic. Landis's basement inventors haven't the resources to do their own R & D. They must steal.

The power of money emerges again in Ian MacLeod's "Past Magic," in which a rich woman resurrects her drowned daughter and, realizing the child needs a daddy, proceeds to clone her estranged husband. McAllister's "Angels," Blumlein's "Bestseller," Kress's *Brain Race*, and Kelly's "Mr. Boy" all involve people using their wealth to modify the human body. Mr. Boy explains, "We're rich . . . We can afford to hate ourselves." Arthur C. Clarke's maxim that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic seems to have been replaced with a new one: any sufficiently large amount of money is indistinguishable from magic.

It's probably never been harder for the science-fiction community to envision a positive future. And yet, as the end of the millennium looms, does it not behoove us to put aside our obsession with the marketplace and engage in some good old fashioned utopian dreaming?

With luck, we'll even get paid for it. 

Editorial

(continued from page 24)

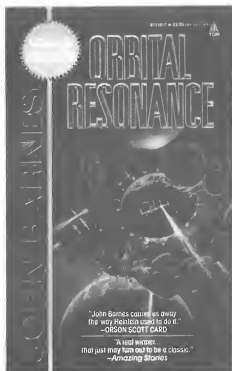
other worlds than our own.

Another signpost is the proliferation of actually quite vigorous and interesting awards, such as the *Tiptree Awards* recently given to Eleanor Arnason's *A Woman of the Iron People* and Gwyneth Jones' *The White Queen*. The Arthur C. Clarke Award in the UK is establishing an impressive track record and deserves more attention in the U.S., where some of the books have not even been published, but are worth seeking out. In the blink of an eye the world changes.

Keep watching the *sf* scene!

—David G. Hartwell and the editors.

Congratulations John Barnes
1991 Nebula Nominee
for



"John Barnes convinces. He may well be the new writer on whom the mantle of Robert Heinlein falls."—Poul Anderson



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The End of an Era

There have been more changes in the sf field in the past few months all at once than in the past several years. The Science Fiction Writers of America, long the flagship professional organization of the field, has decided in a frenzy of democratic passion to rename itself the SFFWA, Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America. They haven't been behaving much like a professional organization with clear goals and purposes for a long while, and rather than offend segments of the membership any more with discussions of clarification, they've solved that by institutionalizing the lack of focus and clarity. Now we can forget any distinction between fantasy and science; poets, visual artists and prose writers; game scripters and screen scripters. All writers and writing are created equal, for all professional purposes.

Meanwhile there is a recession going on and the publishing industry is not immune. The usual domino line of job changes in British publishing approached light speed (Gale to Women's Press from Pan, Fletcher from Mandarin to Pan, Beale from Century/Legend to Weidenfeld, Jarrold to Legend from Macdonald, Tinkers to Evers to Chance, Edwards ascends into the sphere of upper management at HarperCollins—all in four months) and is exacerbated by the discovery that bad Mr. Maxwell sucked the money out of Macdonald before falling into the ocean and the company has had to be sold to Time/Warner (Little, Brown subdivision), leaving an already trimmed-back ad field short one major list editor for a while. And maybe one major list.

And not least, Davis Publications, faced with four genre magazines that don't make them that much money, have sold *Analog* and *Asimov's*, along with *Ellery Queen's* and *Alfred Hitchcock's*, to Dell (a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell—Bantam/Spectra; Doubleday/Foundation; now Dell/Abyss/magazines). It appears that Stan Schmidt and Gardner Dozois will remain editors of the two magazines, but with what changes in policy and what pressures from the new corporate owner? It is a great achievement that we still have fiction magazines at all, and that they are vital and influential factors in the sf community after nearly two decades of dominance by paperback publishing. Now paperback publishing owns two of the three major digests. Let us hope they do not get lost in some multinational megacorporate haze.

What all this indicates to me is that some significant change is happening right now and we do not yet perceive it, or worse, we see it and do not think it matters. The next wave is not on the horizon, it's here. What water are we swimming in right now?

One sign of the deeper sea is that not only does the world out there seem to want science fiction, especially the U.S. variety, but it is beginning to reflect back at us, transformed, the messages we sent two or three decades ago. The celebrated young Japanese writer, Haruki Murakami, recently told me that the writer he would most like to be like is Manuel Puig and that as a teenager in the '60s he read hard-boiled mysteries, Lovecraft, R. E. Howard and Robert Silverberg. Murakami writes post-modern fiction with strong echoes. World sf is becoming something other than what we already know. Read Charlie Brown's excellent *Locus*, featuring reports from

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